The Story of Loki and the Ranger

&

Mythos

Written by Tanja G.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the people who brought these characters to life for more than a decade. Through your performances, you gave them breath, soul, and purpose. In these pages, I've tried to do them justice — to show them as I've always seen them.
So this is for you all.

For ***Tom***, who gave Loki life even when Marvel never allowed him the full grace or gravitas he deserved. My Loki is closer to the one from the Eddas - the trickster and the truth-teller, the outcast, the brilliant mind and the mirror.
The god behind the mask.

For ***Benedict***, who embodied Stephen Strange, the Sorcerer Supreme, as no one else ever could. I hope you find my version of him true to the man beneath the magic - brilliant, flawed, and profoundly human. His humanity beneath all this is his biggest strength and his curse.

For ***Jeremy***, whose Hawkeye has always been one of my favourites - not because of powers, but because of heart. I hope you'll see in my version the quiet hero who endures when others fall, the one who stays when it matters most.

For ***Clark***, who gave us the steadfast Phil Coulson - the man who died by Loki's hand and was brought back to live again by Nick Fury. I hope my Mythos version feels true to him: a man forced to walk beside his killer and see the humanity that time and pain have shaped.

To all of you - I hope one day - by some strange twist of fate, one of you finds this story and gives it a moment of your time. Whether you listen or read, may you feel my gratitude woven through every word.

From one storyteller to another:
Always keep dreaming!

Introduction

Who is the Ranger: A Story of Fate, Strength, and the Unbreakable Bond with Loki

In the vast, winding paths of fate, there are those who shape their own destiny—carving their way through the world with resilience, fire, and an unyielding will.

And then, there is the Ranger.

A woman of the wild. A warrior of the unseen battles. A soul forged not in palaces, but in the heart of the untamed, where the wind speaks in hushed whispers and the trees remember stories older than time itself.

She was never meant to be a queen, nor a conqueror, nor a name spoken in the halls of gods.

But she became something far greater.

She became a legend.

Who Is She?

The Ranger is not defined by where she came from, but by what she has endured.

A woman of skill and strategy, she has walked the razor's edge between light and shadow, between worlds known and unknown.

She does not bow easily.

She does not break.

She is sharp of mind, quick of wit, and fiercely loyal to those who have earned her trust—though few have.

Her presence is steady, her spirit unwavering, her strength carved from the trials of survival, not from the blessing of gods.

But it is this very strength that sets her apart.

Because she is mortal.

And yet, she stands among gods without fear.

How She Met Loki

It was never supposed to happen.

Their paths should never have crossed—the God of Mischief and the Ranger, a mere mortal.

And yet, fate had other plans.

It was not in a golden hall, nor in the midst of war, but in the wild, in the places forgotten by time, where their lives first intertwined.

She was not looking for him.

And he was not searching for her.

And yet—

They found each other.

At first, they were reluctant allies, forced together by circumstance, bound by a mutual enemy neither could defeat alone.

But battle after battle, moment after moment, the walls between them began to crack.

She saw beyond the illusion, beyond the silver tongue and the sharp smirks.

She saw the loneliness behind the mask, the sharp edges of a man who had never truly belonged.

And he saw her.

Not as a pawn.

Not as a fragile mortal meant to be used and discarded.

But as something else.

Something worthy.

And before either of them could stop it—

Before Loki could weave his next lie, before the Ranger could reinforce her defences.

Something had already taken root between them.

Something that even the gods could not undo.

Why It Matters

The Ranger was never meant to change him.

She was never meant to save him.

But she did what no one else had done.

She believed in him.

And Loki—

Loki, the lost prince, the trickster, the god who had spent lifetimes pretending he did not care—

He believed in her, too.

And that?

That changed everything.

Who Is the Ranger?

She is more than a warrior.

More than a survivor.

She is the one thing Loki never knew he needed.

A mirror to his darkness.

A counter to his chaos.

A home he never thought he would find.

And that?

That is what makes her unstoppable.

1.

The firelight flickered within the sanctuary, casting long shadows across the walls lined with books of forgotten wisdom and ancient power. The sound of the waterfall outside was a steady, rhythmic whisper, a heartbeat to the space that Loki called his own. This was his refuge, his sanctuary—his kingdom beyond the reach of prying eyes.

And tonight, someone had dared to desecrate it.

The air felt ***wrong***. It had started subtly—a faint chill that even the fire could not chase away. The scent of the place, usually rich with parchment, old leather, and the lingering spice of Asgardian wine, had turned hollow, sterile. Unnatural. Loki had noticed it the moment he returned, his instincts sharpening to a blade's edge.

Then, he saw her.

The Ranger lay motionless on the great bed tucked within the alcove, her face bathed in the warm glow of the fire. She looked peaceful— too peaceful. Too still.

The moment Loki stepped closer, his heart clenched.

Her breath was there, but it was shallow, her skin unnaturally cool beneath his touch. A sheen of sweat lined her forehead, her fingers twitching ever so slightly, as though fighting something he could not see.

Someone had done this.

And in that moment, a low, velvety chuckle filled the air, laced with the echo of a past Loki had long left behind.

"Ah, Loki. I was beginning to think you wouldn't notice.”

The voice slithered through the room like poisoned silk, and Loki went still. Not out of fear. Not out of shock. But out of the razor-thin restraint between civility and destruction.

"Mora," he said, his voice quiet, edged with something lethal.

She emerged from the shadows near the bookshelves, draped in shimmering black, her silver hair coiling like threads of moonlight around her shoulders. Her eyes—piercing, almost luminous—held the smug amusement of a cat toying with its prey.

Loki's jaw tightened. "You have five seconds to explain before I tear your wretched existence apart."

Mora chuckled, stepping closer, her fingers ghosting over the spines of his books as though she belonged here. "Is that any way to greet an old acquaintance? Especially when I’ve brought such an interesting gift."

His gaze snapped back to the Ranger, still locked in unnatural slumber. "What did you do to her?"

Mora tilted her head. "I simply... expanded her mind. Showed her the door to things she was never meant to see. A world of nightmares, of truths beneath truths. And now, my dear Loki, she's trapped in a place she cannot wake from—unless I choose to free her."

A slow, seething breath left him. "You dare—"

"Oh, I more than dare, my sweet Trickster," she purred, stepping into the light fully now. "You see, I remember you as you once were. A master of deception. A player in the great game of gods and mortals. But now? Now you care for someone. How terribly...mortal of you."

His hands clenched into fists, magic crackling beneath his skin like an impending storm. "You have made a mistake so grievous, Mora, that not even the gods will be able to save you from what comes next."

Mora only smiled, her amusement undeterred. "Have I?" she mused, her tone like a blade dragged slowly against glass. "Or have I merely given you a reminder of who you truly are? Let's find out, shall we?"

And with that, the shadows surged forward.

Loki did not hesitate.

The fire in the hearth roared violently as raw, unfettered power erupted from within him, shaking the sanctuary to its core. The air split with a sound like cracking ice, the very walls seeming to bend around the force of his rage.

Gone was the smirking, silver-tongued trickster.

In his place stood something else entirely.

Something terrifying.

Something even Mora, for the first time in her wretched existence, had not accounted for.

The storm had come.

And Loki was its master.

The very air trembled, caught between the rippling folds of raw magic and the sheer force of Loki's rage. The fire in the hearth twisted, licking up the walls as if possessed, shadows warping and coiling around him like a living storm.

For the first time in her wretched existence, Mora *staggered* back.

"Loki," she breathed, her voice still edged with amusement, but now—now there was something else lurking beneath it.

Doubt.

Good.

He did not answer her. Not with words. He lifted a single hand, and with it, the walls of the sanctuary *shuddered*. The bookshelves groaned, the very structure of his domain *warped* under the pressure of his fury.

She had expected *anger*.

She had expected *threats*.

But this…this *silence…*was something else entirely.

Mora had seen him play at rage before. Had seen him taunt, feign, manipulate. He had always wielded his temper like a finely honed dagger…precise, calculated, a performance of fire and words.

This? This was *different*.

This was *cold*.

This was *death*.

"You should run," Loki murmured, and it was not a suggestion. It was not a warning. It was a *sentence*.

The air *fractured*. Shadows *tore* away from their rightful places, twisting into jagged, unnatural shapes as they *lurched* toward her.

And Mora did what she had not done in a very, very long time.

She *ran*.

With a sharp flick of her wrist, she *ripped* open a portal—a jagged tear in space, leading into the great abyss of the Yawning Void, a place between realms. She did not look back. She could *feel* him behind her, *feel* the storm closing in, and for the first time in centuries, she *feared*.

She landed hard, the world shifting around her as she stumbled into the dense forests of Alfheim. The air was thick with golden mist, ancient trees towering high above. Here, the light was a shield, a sacred force that no darkness could penetrate. Here, she could—

No.

The moment she turned, she *saw* him.

Loki stood at the edge of the clearing, wreathed in shadows that curled around him like the tendrils of some primordial beast. The light of Alfheim—pure, untouchable—*dimmed* in his presence.

"You'll have to do better than that," he said, voice smooth, measured. Amused.

Mora *bolted*.

She tore through the trees, the very *world* shifting as she opened another portal—Vanaheim—only to feel the *cold fingers* of his magic *graze* her shoulder just as she crossed through.

She did not slow.

She *could not* slow.

Through Vanaheim, through the frozen wastes of Jotunheim, through the desolation of Muspelheim, she ran.

And *every time—every single time*—he was *already there*.

He did not *chase* her in the way a predator might. He did not *run* after her.

He simply *was*.

A step behind. A whisper at her ear. A breath on her neck.

No matter how fast she moved, no matter how many realms she crossed, she could not *outrun him*.

Because she had not just provoked Loki.

She had *unleashed* him.

And now, there was *nowhere left to hide*.

Mora stumbled into the towering ruins of Nidavellir, her breath ragged, her magic fraying at the edges. The ancient forge-city lay in eerie silence, the great mechanisms of the Dwarves long stilled. Blackened

stone and rusted iron stretched in every direction, the remains of once-great machines standing like the bones of giants.

She pressed a hand to her chest, willing herself to steady.

He is not here.

She did not believe it.

Loki had been there at every step, his presence bleeding into every realm she had fled to. His wrath was not a mere storm—it was relentless, a force outside of time and space.

And yet, now…

Silence.

Mora let out a breath, allowing the shadows around her to settle. Her fingers twitched, drawing invisible sigils in the air, weaving a spell so delicate that even the gods themselves would struggle to detect it.

A trap.

A final play.

If she could not escape him, then she would bind him.

Mora knew Loki better than most. Knew that his greatest strength—his mind, his cunning—was also his weakness . He expected tricks. He lived for them.

So she would not offer him a lie.

She would offer him the truth—twisted, distorted, turned into a noose he would not see coming.

She did not have to wait long.

A ripple in the air. A subtle, almost imperceptible shift in the fabric of reality itself.

And then—he was there.

Loki did not step through a portal. Did not appear in a flash of light.

He simply was.

Standing at the edge of the ruined forge, cloaked in flickering shadows that breathed and coiled around his form. The molten glow of fading embers reflected in his eyes, but there was no warmth in them—only an abyss of cold, unrelenting fury.

Mora straightened, forcing a smirk onto her lips. "You are persistent," she admitted, tilting her head. "And I do so love a persistent man."

Loki said nothing.

His silence was worse than words.

Mora felt a sliver of something sharp press against her spine—a sensation she had not known in a long, long time.

Fear.

But she would not cower.

She flicked her wrist. The sigils woven into the very air flared, the ancient stone beneath them shuddering as the spell ignited. Tendrils of raw, pulsing magic lashed out from the ruins, snapping toward Loki, binding him, dragging at his essence, his very form.

A cage of truth, woven with the echoes of his own mind.

For a flickering instant, Loki's form blurred, his expression unreadable.

And then—

He laughed.

Low. Amused. Almost pitying.

Mora's breath hitched.

That was not the reaction she had expected.

"Clever," Loki murmured, rolling his shoulders as the magic crackled around him. "But did you truly think you could trap me in my own tricks?"

The bindings—woven from ancient, undeniable truths—collapsed in on themselves. Mora barely had time to register the reversal before the spell turned—before her own magic coiled around her, tightening, crushing—

A strangled breath left her lips.

And then, suddenly—nothing.

She was no longer in Nidavellir.

She was nowhere.

The ruins, the stone, the embers—gone.

Only shadows remained.

She turned sharply, her heart hammering. "What did you —?"

Loki stood before her, untouched, unbothered. "I let you run," he said simply, his voice almost gentle. "I let you hope."

He stepped closer. The darkness bent to him. "But you were never going to escape me, Mora."

His voice—so calm, so patient—sent a cold, crawling dread through her bones.

Because for the first time in her existence, Mora understood.

She had not stirred a dragon.

She had awakened it.

And now, it was hungry.

The darkness breathed around her.

Cold. Silent. Unforgiving.

Mora was no stranger to shadows. She had wielded them, bent them to her will, twisted them into illusions so seamless that even gods had faltered before her.

But this?

This was something else.

Loki had always been a master of deception. A weaver of lies, a dancer on the knife's edge between truth and trickery. She had known him as hat Loki—the sly, silver-tongued prince who played with chaos as a child might play with fire.

But the god standing before her now was no longer playing.

He had become the fire.

Mora swallowed hard, smoothing the tremor in her breath, forcing a smirk onto her lips. "My, my," she purred, tilting her head just enough to make it seem effortless, just enough to mask the war raging in her mind. "Look at you. How you've grown."

Loki said nothing.

His silence was a weight, pressing against the very fabric of her magic.

Mora felt it—his presence shifting, warping the very air. The space around them was unnatural, not tethered to any single realm. He had ripped her from reality, cast her into something between, something beyond.

And yet—he was calm.

Not seething. Not screaming.

No, this was a Loki who had transcended the rage that had once consumed him. He did not need to prove his power. He was power.

Which meant—

She had one chance.

Her fingers twitched, ever so slightly, barely perceptible to the untrained eye.

A whisper of a spell, ancient and dangerous, slipped between the folds of her voice. "You always did have a soft spot for me," she murmured, stepping forward, slow and deliberate. "A weakness, I think."

She let her magic seep into her words, weaving around his mind like silk, a delicate thread of persuasion. "Perhaps we don't have to be enemies, Loki. Perhaps this doesn't have to end in blood and ruin."

She reached out, her fingers ghosting along his wrist, her lips curving in a slow, knowing smile. "Let me show you what we could be—"

Her voice caught.

Because the moment she touched him—

She felt nothing.

No warmth. No breath. No reaction.

Just a void.

She looked up—into his eyes.

And froze.

They were not green.

Not anymore.

A raw, unfiltered light burned within them. Not fire. Not rage. Not the flickering ember of mischief she had once known.

This was power.

Pure. Cold. Unyielding.

And then—he laughed.

Low. Quiet. Almost pitying.

Mora’s blood ran cold.

"Oh, Mora," Loki murmured, voice smooth as silk, rich as velvet. "You think this is still a game, don't you?"

His wrist twisted—just slightly—and her entire spell shattered.

The force of it threw her back, like a puppet cut from its strings. She hit the ground hard, gasping as her own magic cracked against her ribs like a whip.

She scrambled up, mind reeling, hands clawing for another spell—any spell—

And then Loki was there.

Right in front of her.

"Did you think I would fall for that?" he asked, his voice still infuriatingly calm . "That I would bow to tricks? To honeyed words?"

He bent down slightly, his gaze locking onto hers, his smirk razor-sharp. "I am no longer a god of petty illusions, Mora."

The space around them rippled, his presence pressing against reality itself.

"I am something far, far worse."

The air collapsed around him, a silent detonation of magic so ancient, so primal, that Mora barely had time to scream before the force of it ripped through her.

Darkness surged.

And then—

Silence.

She awoke, gasping.

Her body ached, her mind splintered at the edges, as though she had been unmade and rebuilt by something she could not comprehend.

She was back in his sanctuary.

The fire still burned in the hearth. The waterfall still roared beyond the windows. The bookshelves still stood, unmoved.

It was as if nothing had ever happened.

Except—

She could not move.

Loki stood over her, hands clasped behind his back, his expression unreadable. "You should be grateful" he said softly. "I could have left you lost in the abyss, but I thought—" His smirk returned, sharp as a dagger. "It would be more fitting for you to wake up here, in the very place you defiled."

Mora trembled.

Not from pain.

Not from exhaustion.

But from true, unrelenting fear.

Because for the first time, she understood.

Loki had not merely changed.

He had evolved.

And she—who once believed she could control him, trick him, bend him—had been nothing more than a fool standing in the path of a storm.

Loki crouched before her, tilting his head slightly. "Now, tell me, Mora," he murmured, voice like velvet and steel. "What lesson have you learned today?"

His smirk deepened.

" And should I let you live long enough to remember it? "

Mora’s breath came in sharp, uneven gasps. The world around her still felt wrong—as if Loki had rewritten reality itself to suit his will.

Perhaps he had.

She was bound. Not by chains. Not by magic she could feel. But by something worse.

By him.

The weight of his presence pressed against her like the slow, inevitable descent of a blade against a fragile throat. His power wrapped around her, unseen yet undeniable. It watched her. Judged her.

She had danced on the edge of gods before. Had charmed kings, twisted heroes, undone empires with nothing but whispers and well-placed shadows.

But none of that would save her now.

"Loki…" she gasped, forcing a small, delicate tremble into her voice. "You don't want to do this."

His expression remained unreadable.

"I was—" She wet her lips, shifting slightly. "I was only playing, you know that. Just a game. A test, even. You, of all people, should understand the thrill of the gamble."

Still, he did not move.

Mora let out a soft, breathy laugh, as if the situation could still be turned, as if she could weave the right words and pull him back from this abyss. "You've won, Trickster. You have me. What more do you want?"

Loki's head tilted slightly, the dim firelight casting shifting shadows over his face.

"Want?" His voice was calm. Cool. Dangerous. "What makes you believe I want anything at all?"

She forced a chuckle, but it wavered. "Oh, come now. I know you, Loki. I know the look in your eyes when you're playing the long game. You've already thought three steps ahead, haven't you?"

She softened her gaze, letting her lips curve into something almost genuine. "So tell me—what is my part in it?"

Loki let out a quiet breath. A chuckle.

It sent a chill down her spine.

"Mora," he murmured, his voice silk-lined steel. "You are under the impression that you still have a role to play."

She stiffened, her heartbeat a wild, frantic drum in her chest.

His smirk was slow, almost indulgent. "Shall I tell you the truth?"

Mora swallowed hard, her mind racing.

"You are not a piece on my board, Mora," Loki continued. "You are a broken game I no longer have any interest in playing."

Her stomach twisted.

No, no, that wasn't right. He had to want something. She could work with something. A bargain. A deception. A distraction. But nothing—nothing was a void she could not manipulate.

"Then—then kill me," she whispered, trying to make it sound like a challenge. "End it, then, Loki."

His smirk sharpened. "Oh, now why would I do that?"

Mora felt a flicker of something far worse than fear.

Because Loki wasn't angry anymore.

He was amused.

She had seen anger in him before. Had seen fury, pettiness, even cruelty. But this—this quiet—this terrible, patient knowing—

This was new.

And it was terrifying.

"Do you think death is the worst thing I could give you?" Loki asked softly. "Oh, Mora. You should know better than that."

His fingers twitched, and suddenly—

She couldn’t breathe.

Not because of magic. Not because of an unseen force.

But because she was somewhere else.

A void.

A space of nothingness.

No air. No heat. No cold. No walls. No ground beneath her feet.

Just emptiness.

And then—voices.

Whispers. Her whispers. The echoes of every lie she had ever told, every manipulation, every twisted game.

They whispered back to her.

“You are nothing."

"You are powerless."

"You are forgotten."

"He does not care."

"You are lost."

Mora screamed.

And then—

She was back.

The fire burned beside her once more. The walls of the sanctuary stood unmoved. But she—

She was shaking.

Loki watched her, eyes gleaming in the dim light. "Do you understand now?"

Mora sucked in a breath, barely holding herself together. "You—" Her voice broke . "What are you?"

His smirk returned. Slow. Amused. Lethal.

"I am the god you thought you could deceive," Loki murmured. "And you?" He leaned in, so close that his breath ghosted over her cheek. "You are at my mercy."

Mora clenched her jaw, trying to summon her pride, her composure.

But Loki only chuckled. "Don’t fight it, Mora," he whispered, a cruel sort of mirth in his voice. "It will only hurt more if you do."

She had lost.

Completely.

Utterly.

And for the first time in her existence—Mora had no more tricks left to play.

The silence between them stretched, heavy with inevitability.

Mora knelt where she had fallen, her breath shallow, her mind still spinning from what had just transpired.

She had lost.

Utterly.

And the god before her—the true Loki, the one unshackled by games, by illusions, by the need to prove himself—stood watching her, his expression unreadable.

Then, he spoke.

"I should end you."

His voice was quiet.

It was worse than if he had shouted.

"I should unravel you at the seams, wipe your name from the tongues of gods and mortals alike, let time forget you ever existed."

Mora swallowed hard, forcing herself to meet his gaze. "Then do it," she whispered. "Finish it."

A smirk curled at the corner of his lips, but there was no humour in it. "Oh, Mora," he murmured, stepping closer, his presence a suffocating weight of power. "How little you understand."

She flinched as he raised his hand—but there was no strike, no final blow.

Instead—

She felt it.

Her power—tearing away from her like silk being unraveled, like strings being severed.

Mora gasped, clutching at her chest as if she could hold onto it, as if she could stop the inevitable.

"No—"

The magic she had wielded for centuries, the strength she had relied upon, the shadows that had always answered her call—

Gone.

A hollow remained where they had once been.

"What—" Her voice shook, panic lacing her words. "What have you done?"

Loki tilted his head, watching her with quiet amusement. "You once sought to trap another's mind in a prison of nightmares," he said softly. "Now you will know what it is to be truly bound."

The air around her shifted—tore.

And then—

She fell.

The impact was brutal.

Cold, unforgiving stone beneath her.

A sky of burning orange and violet stretched above—a sun too harsh, a wind too sharp, the scent of damp soil and struggle thick in the air.

Mora gasped, her entire body aching from the force of the landing.

Pain.

Real.

Physical.

No magic to dull it.

No tricks to escape it.

Around her, she heard voices—rough, weary, but strong.

A group of figures stood nearby—clad in armour, worn and patched, their weapons not for conquest , but for

defence. Their faces bore the lines of hardship, of resilience, of unity.

They stared at her—not with fear, nor reverence.

Just indifference.

A newcomer, like so many before.

A burden, until proven otherwise.

Loki's voice echoed in her mind, a whisper of a god far, far beyond her reach now.

"Survive, Mora. If you can."

"Earn your place. If you dare."

"For you are nothing now."

She is powerless.

She is unknown.

She is alone.

And for the first time in her existence—Mora must fight, not to conquer, but to belong.

Will she learn?

Will she break?

Only time will tell.

But one thing is certain.

Loki has already won.

And Mora?

She will never be the same again.

2.

The fire in Loki's sanctuary still burned, casting long, flickering shadows across the walls. The scent of Asgardian wine, parchment, and old wood lingered in the air, undisturbed.

But the room felt empty.

Because she was still gone.

Loki stood over the bed where the Ranger lay—motionless, bathed in firelight. Her breath was steady, but her fingers twitched ever so slightly, caught in the grip of something beyond reality.

A prison of nightmares.

A realm of twisted horrors, where Mora had left her to rot.

Loki should have felt relief that the sorceress had been dealt with. That the wretched woman had been stripped of everything she once was.

But he did not.

Because the Ranger was still trapped.

And that—that—was unacceptable.

He lowered himself to the edge of the bed, his hand hovering just over hers. Her skin was cool, but not cold. Not lifeless. But still… *wrong*.

Loki closed his eyes.

He had already punished the guilty.

Now, he would reclaim what was his.

Loki did not bother with subtlety.

Mora had woven this nightmare prison—had crafted it specifically to trap the Ranger's mind, ensuring that even if her body survived, her soul would be lost forever.

But Mora was gone now.

Her magic had crumbled the moment Loki had severed her from it.

Which meant—

There was nothing left to keep him out.

Loki placed a hand on the Ranger's forehead, his fingers barely grazing her temple. His eyes flared, raw magic humming beneath his skin.

"You are not lost to me," he whispered.

And then—

He followed her in.

The moment he entered the nightmare realm, Loki understood the cruelty of what had been done to her.

It was not simply a dream.

It was destruction.

The world around him was fractured, twisted reflections of memories and fears tangled into something grotesque.

Fragments of places the Ranger had once known floated in the abyss—a battlefield, half-consumed by darkness. A forgotten path in the wilderness, trees twisted into hollowed-out carcasses.

And above all—

The whispers.

"You are alone."

"You will never wake up."

"You were abandoned."

Loki exhaled slowly.

"Pathetic."

Mora had been skilled—he would grant her that. But she had made one crucial mistake.

She had assumed that the Ranger was weak enough to be consumed by this.

That she would surrender to it.

But the Ranger was not weak.

And he was here now.

He stepped forward, his presence warping the nightmare realm around him. The whispers hissed, recoiling from him, like shadows slithering away from a flame.

Loki ignored them. He had no time for their petty illusions.

There was only one thing he sought.

And then—

He saw her.

She was curled on the ground, wrapped in shadows, her breath shallow.

Her eyes were open, but they saw nothing.

The nightmare had twisted her mind so deeply that she could no longer separate the real from the illusion.

Loki crouched beside her, his expression unreadable.

"Tanja," he murmured.

She did not react.

Her hands clutched at nothing—fingers grasping at the air like she was trying to hold on to something that was already gone.

Loki frowned.

He reached forward, but before he could touch her—

She flinched.

A sharp breath escaped her lips as she scrambled away from him, terror flashing across her face.

Loki went very still.

"No..." she whispered, her voice hoarse, fragile. "No more tricks. No more... I won’t believe it. I won’t believe it."

Loki exhaled slowly.

"You think I am another illusion," he observed.

She trembled. "I know you are."

His lips curved into something almost sad.

"Then allow me to prove you wrong."

And without another word—

He broke the nightmare apart.

The realm collapsed in an instant.

The twisted battlefield? Gone.

The suffocating shadows? Destroyed.

The whispers? Silenced.

All that remained was him and her—in a vast, endless void.

The Ranger gasped, blinking as reality shifted around her. "What—"

Loki tilted his head. "Do you see clearly now?"

Her eyes—sharp, wary, exhausted—locked onto his. "You’re real?"

A smirk tugged at the corner of his lips. "That depends," he mused. "Are you still afraid of me?"

She stared at him for a long moment.

Then, finally—

She collapsed into him.

Loki barely moved as she pressed her forehead to his chest, her entire form shaking.

Not in fear.

Not in despair.

But in relief.

A slow breath escaped her. "You found me."

Loki allowed his smirk to soften—just slightly.

"Of course I did," he murmured. "Did you truly believe I wouldn't?"

She let out a quiet, tired laugh against him. "No..."

Then, softer—

"I just didn't think I'd ever wake up."

Loki's gaze darkened, his hand lifting to tangle in her hair, holding her against him as if anchoring her to the present.

"You are awake," he said simply. "And you are safe."

And as the last remnants of the nightmare realm vanished, as reality reclaimed them both—

Loki knew one thing for certain.

He had won.

And she—

She would never be lost to him again.

At first, Loki had thought the worst was over.

Mora was gone, stripped of her power, cast into a life where she would never again wield deception as a weapon. The Ranger was back—her body whole, her presence tangible once more. The nightmare realm no longer held her captive.

And yet…

It had not released her.

Not fully.

It was subtle at first. She laughed when she was expected to, spoke as she always had, moved with the same quiet grace she had before. But Loki saw it—the way she hesitated before sleep, the way exhaustion began to take root in the corners of her eyes.

The way she would startle at the edge of waking, her breath shallow, fingers twitching as if grasping for something unseen.

She did not speak of it.

And that was how he knew it was worse than she let on.

The Ranger was strong, fiercely so. But even the strongest warriors could be broken in ways that left no visible wounds.

And Loki—Loki had seen this before.

He had seen it in the warriors of Asgard, returning from battles no one should have survived. He had seen it in the refugees of realms left to ruin, their eyes hollow, their minds still trapped in a war long since over.

And, if he was honest…

He had seen it in himself.

That was what unsettled him most.

He knew what it was to carry wounds unseen, to bear scars that did not fade. He knew the weight of pretending to be whole while a war raged just beneath the surface.

And that… that was what she was doing.

At first, he let her keep her walls.

She did not want his interference, not yet, and Loki understood the value of patience. He would not push—not immediately.

But the signs became impossible to ignore.

She was exhausted.

She would stay up long past reason, the candlelight flickering against the walls of his sanctuary as she stared at books she was not reading. When she did sleep, it was restless—short, fitful moments stolen before she startled

awake, breath sharp, hands clutching the blankets as if expecting them to disappear.

And then…

Then came the fear.

Not fear of him. Not fear of anything real.

But fear of the moment she closed her eyes.

Loki had watched her face monsters without flinching. Had seen her stand against Mora's magic with unwavering resolve.

But this?

She could not fight this.

And it was destroying her.

It was late when Loki finally confronted her.

The fire burned low, casting the room in warm, golden light. Outside, the sound of the waterfall was steady, soothing—one of the few constants in this place of ever-shifting magic.

She sat curled in the chair near the hearth, her body tense despite the illusion of ease. A book rested in her lap, open but unread. Her eyes were distant, unfocused, trapped somewhere Loki could not follow.

And he had had enough.

Without a word, he stepped forward, plucking the book from her hands and snapping it shut.

She blinked up at him in surprise. "Loki—"

"You are not reading," he said simply, setting the book aside. "You are distracting yourself."

Her expression shifted, a flicker of irritation crossing her face. "I don’t know what you’re talking about."

He gave her a look. One that dared her to lie to him.

She sighed, leaning back in the chair, rubbing a hand over her face. "I’m fine, Loki."

"No, you are not."

A beat of silence.

She exhaled slowly, shaking her head. "I just need time."

Loki’s jaw tightened. "Time will not mend a wound you refuse to acknowledge, Tanja."

Her eyes snapped to his at the name.

He only ever called her that when it mattered.

She looked away first. "You wouldn’t understand."

Loki laughed. A quiet, bitter sound. "Oh, I assure you, I understand better than most."

She frowned at him. "Do you?"

He stepped closer, placing a hand on the arm of her chair, leaning down just enough to hold her gaze. "I know

what it is to fear sleep. To fear what waits on the other side of it."

Something flickered in her eyes.

Recognition.

Understanding.

But still, she shook her head. "It's not the same."

"No," Loki agreed softly. "It never is. But it does not make it any less real."

She swallowed hard. "It's just dreams. They're not real."

"No?" he mused. "Then why do they still have a hold on you?"

She had no answer.

Not one she was willing to give.

Loki straightened, considering her for a long moment before he spoke again. "You do not trust sleep. You do not trust that you will wake from it."

She stiffened. "That's not—"

"You do not have to lie to me, Tanja." His voice was gentle, but firm. "I see you. And I am telling you now—you are safe."

She let out a quiet breath. " I know that."

"Then believe it."

Silence stretched between them.

Then, finally—finally—she whispered, "I don’t know how.”

Loki did not hesitate.

He extended a hand, palm open, steady. "Then let me show you."

She hesitated, staring at it.

A choice.

To continue pretending she could fight this alone.

Or to trust him.

Slowly—hesitantly—she placed her hand in his.

And Loki pulled her to her feet.

"Come," he murmured. "You will sleep tonight."

Her fingers tightened slightly around his. "And if the nightmares return?"

Loki’s expression softened.

"Then I will be here when you wake."

And for the first time since she had escaped the nightmare realm—

She believed him.

Loki led her toward the alcove where the bed lay, the fire casting soft, golden light over the sanctuary. The Ranger

followed, but there was tension in every step, a subtle stiffness in her fingers where they still rested in his palm.

Loki said nothing as he sat on the edge of the bed, his grip steady, his touch a quiet reassurance.

She did not let go of his hand.

Not yet.

Her gaze flickered to the blankets, to the inviting warmth of the space, and then—to the shadows at the edges of the room.

The place where nightmares waited.

Loki felt the hesitation in her breath.

He had expected this.

"Tanja," he said softly.

Her eyes lifted to his, and even now, with all the exhaustion weighing on her shoulders, she responded to the sound of her name from his lips.

He could command her to sleep.

He could weave a spell so delicate that she would drift into slumber before she even knew it had happened. He could lock her mind into peace, push the nightmares back into oblivion, shield her from their grasp.

But it would not last.

That was the mistake of so many before him—believing that healing was something that could be forced.

Loki knew better.

"You are afraid," he said, voice even, calm. "Not of sleep itself, but of what waits inside it."

Her fingers twitched slightly in his grasp. "I don’t want to close my eyes."

Loki nodded, as if they were simply discussing strategy, as if this were not a battle already being fought in the depths of her mind. "Then don’t."

She blinked, caught off guard. "What?"

"Stay awake," he said smoothly. "Fight it if you must. But I will remain here with you."

A flicker of something crossed her face. "You’ll just sit there?"

Loki smirked. "I have endured far worse company than yours, my dear."

A breath of a laugh escaped her—soft, almost imperceptible—but there.

That was what he needed. A sliver of something real.

"Lie down," Loki continued, adjusting slightly so that she had space to rest beside him. "Rest your body, if nothing else."

She hesitated—but only for a moment. Then, slowly, carefully, she settled down, her back to him, her body rigid beneath the blankets.

Loki did not move at first. He simply sat there, present, unwavering.

Minutes passed.

Her breathing remained shallow. The stiffness in her frame did not ease.

"You do not trust this," he observed quietly.

"I trust you," she corrected, but there was something strained beneath the words.

Loki tilted his head slightly. "Then why do you lie there as if waiting for the world to collapse?"

She exhaled slowly. "Because it always does."

Loki’s gaze softened.

He had thought the same thing.

So many times.

"Come here," Loki murmured.

She hesitated. "What?"

"Turn around," he said, his voice gentle, patient. "Face me."

For a long moment, she didn’t move.

Then, slowly—reluctantly—she rolled onto her side, facing him.

Loki was watching her intently, but there was no expectation in his gaze. No force, no command.

Just understanding.

She had seen him in many forms—charming, mischievous, dangerous. But this Loki—the one who waited, who offered his presence without condition—was something different.

He lifted a hand, giving her the space to pull away if she wished. But she did not.

His fingers traced a slow, careful path along her temple, a whisper of contact. "You are not alone in this," he murmured.

A breath hitched in her throat.

And then—

She let her forehead rest against his.

She did not speak.

Did not move.

Just breathed.

Loki closed his eyes, his voice no more than a whisper against her skin.

"I will not let them take you again."

The shudder in her breath was almost imperceptible.

But this time, when she closed her eyes—

She did not open them again so quickly.

And Loki did not let go.

She would still wake in the night.

She would still struggle.

Loki knew this.

But tonight, for the first time—

She did not wake alone.

And that, he decided, was the first victory in a battle that would be fought together.

The days passed, and the shadows did not vanish.

They clung to the edges of the Ranger's mind, lurking just beyond reach, whispering when sleep threatened to take her. But she did not surrender to them—not fully.

Because every night, Loki was there.

At first, it had been small things. Sitting in the same room while she forced herself to rest. A steady, silent presence she could reach for if she dared. She had not dared—not immediately.

But he had waited.

And one night, as exhaustion crept deeper into her bones, as the weight of sleeplessness bore down on her, she had turned toward him—just slightly, just enough that he knew.

And he had understood.

He had laid beside her, not touching, not pressing, but there. Close enough that when sleep came, she did not wake in terror.

Close enough that, when she woke with a sharp inhale, fingers trembling, she found herself anchored by his presence.

And he had simply stayed.

It did not happen all at once.

Healing never did.

But something had shifted.

The Ranger still feared the moment of closing her eyes. But she no longer feared waking up alone.

And so, one night, she made a choice.

As they sat by the fire, the embers casting soft, flickering shadows along the stone walls, she let out a slow breath and turned to him.

"Loki."

He looked up, his sharp eyes catching every detail—the way her hands curled slightly, as if bracing herself. The way she held herself rigid, a soldier preparing for battle.

"What is it?" he asked, voice calm, steady.

She hesitated. Then—

"I want to try."

Loki did not ask what she meant. He already knew.

His gaze softened, though his expression did not change. "Then come."

She let out a breath, as if relieved that he would not question it. That he would not make her explain the battle she was about to fight.

She stood, moving toward the alcove where the bed awaited.

Loki followed.

When she settled into the blankets, she still held herself stiffly—but this time, she turned toward him first.

Loki watched her carefully, waiting.

She met his gaze, and for the first time since she had escaped Mora’s prison, there was something resolute in her eyes.

Not fear.

Not uncertainty.

Determination.

She would not be ruled by this.

She had endured worse.

She had survived.

"I won’t break," she whispered.

Loki’s lips curved, just slightly. "No, you won’t."

She hesitated—just a moment—before shifting closer. Not quite touching. But closer.

Loki said nothing.

He simply lifted an arm in silent invitation.

And after another heartbeat of hesitation, she took it.

She let herself rest against him, her cheek just barely pressing to his chest.

Loki remained still, but his arm curled securely around her.

A shield.

An anchor.

She let out a slow, deep breath.

And then—

For the first time in weeks—

She slept.

Not out of exhaustion.

Not because sleep had finally overpowered her.

But because she had chosen to.

And when the nightmares came, as they always did—

Loki was there.

His warmth. His steady breathing. The quiet, reassuring weight of his presence.

She did not wake in terror.

She did not wake alone.

She woke to the sound of his voice, low and calm, murmuring her name in the quiet dark.

And she knew.

She had survived.

She would heal.

And she would never have to do it alone.

There would still be bad nights.

There would still be moments when the shadows whispered louder than reason, when fear tried to sink its claws into her ribs.

But now—

Now, she had him.

And that was enough.

For now.

The nights slowly became easier.

Not effortless—never that. But easier.

Sleep no longer felt like a battle she was destined to lose. It was a battlefield, yes, but one where she had finally

found her footing. She was learning—not just to endure, but to fight back.

And Loki…

Loki was always there.

He did not coddle her. He did not try to fix what had been broken with mere words. He knew that healing was not something that could be gifted—it had to be claimed.

And so, he did what no one else had ever done for him.

He waited.

He did not rush her. He did not pry. He was simply present. A steady, unshakable force at her side, ready to catch her if she stumbled—but never once taking away her right to stand on her own.

And she did stand.

The first time she fell asleep without hesitation, he noticed.

The first time she woke without panic, he noticed.

The first time she fell into step beside him without that hidden tension in her shoulders—he noticed.

And when she smiled—a real, unburdened smile—he noticed that most of all.

The fire had burned low, the sky beyond the windows shifting into the soft blue of early dawn.

Loki stirred, barely opening his eyes.

He had woken countless times over the past weeks to the absence of her. The quiet way she would slip out of bed after another restless night, the silent war she fought with herself when she thought he wasn't looking.

But this morning—

She was still there.

Still curled close, her breath steady, her form relaxed.

Loki watched her for a long moment, something unreadable in his expression.

This was new.

She had let herself stay.

He did not move. Did not stir. Did not do a single thing that might wake her before she was ready.

And when she did wake, blinking blearily, shifting slightly against him—

She did not startle.

She did not pull away.

She simply breathed in deeply, stretched a little, and… stayed.

Her gaze lifted to his, still half-lidded with sleep.

Loki arched an eyebrow. "Comfortable?"

She made a sleepy, amused sound, her lips twitching into a smirk. "Surprisingly so."

His own smirk flickered into place. "A miracle, truly."

A soft huff of laughter.

It was a small thing. But it mattered.

It was proof that she was coming back to herself.

Loki tilted his head. "What now, then?"

She considered for a moment.

Then, with quiet certainty—

"Breakfast."

Loki barked a laugh, shaking his head. "Well, if that isn’t a sign of recovery, I don’t know what is."

She was healing.

There would still be nights where shadows clawed at the edges of her mind.

There would still be moments when doubt whispered cruel things in her ear.

But she was healing.

Because now, she knew.

She was not alone.

And Loki would always be there.

Not as her saviour. Not as her shield.

But as her equal.

Her anchor.

Her everything.

And for the first time since she had been trapped in that nightmare—

She allowed herself to believe that she would be whole again.

And that was enough.

For now.

For always.

3.

The Spell No One Could See

Loki had never been one to leave things to chance.

Not when it came to her.

She would never allow him to weave spells of protection around her knowingly—she was too proud, too independent to accept such a thing.

So he had not asked.

He had simply done it.

The spell was not a leash, nor a cage. It did not bind her, did not control her. It would never force her hand or influence her choices.

It was a tether.

A thread of pure, ancient magic, woven so deeply into her being that it had become part of her. It did not change her, did not alter who she was—it merely ensured that should the day ever come when she faced true, inescapable danger…

Loki would be there.

Instantly.

No matter where.

No matter what.

The only trace of it—if one knew exactly what to look for —was a faint, almost imperceptible shimmer beneath her skin when the light caught it just right. Like the ghost of something unseen, flickering at the edges of reality.

But no one had noticed.

Not yet.

Until Stephen Strange stepped into their path.

It happened in a place of knowledge— where else?

Kamar-Taj had always been a crossroads of power, a place where the air thrummed with the presence of magic old and new. And when the Ranger had stepped into its halls, Stephen Strange had immediately felt it.

Something was off.

Not wrong, not corrupt, but different.

His magic was attuned to things that should not be— fluctuations in time, distortions in space.

And she …

She carried something woven into her very soul.

Something masterful.

Something he could not immediately understand.

It wasn't dark magic. It wasn't destructive .

But it was old.

And potent.

He watched her as she moved, spoke, completely unaware of the quiet hum of energy that clung to her like a second skin.

He almost said something—until his gaze flickered to Loki.

And the moment their eyes met, the moment Strange saw the way Loki's expression remained perfectly neutral.

He knew.

It was him.

And Loki knew that he knew.

Strange did not speak of it immediately.

He waited—until the Ranger was gone, until she had stepped beyond earshot.

Only then did he turn to Loki, arms crossing, his gaze sharp. "You placed a spell on her."

Loki smirked. "How delightful that you noticed."

Strange did not smile. "What does it do?"

"Nothing," Loki said smoothly. "Unless it is needed."

Strange narrowed his eyes. " That's not an answer."

Loki tilted his head, feigning thoughtfulness. "And yet, it is the only one you are going to receive."

Strange let out a slow breath, considering. "It's ancient. Too well-hidden for even me to decipher completely. And

yet— " He arched a brow. "You expect me to simply accept that it’s harmless?"

Loki’s smirk remained, but something sharpened in his gaze. "If I had wanted to harm her, Strange," he said quietly, "do you truly think I would need such subtlety?"

A beat of silence.

Strange watched him.

Loki did not waver.

He had expected the Sorcerer Supreme to notice—eventually. But what he had not expected…

Was that Strange understood.

Because he would have done the same.

And Loki saw it in his eyes—the flicker of recognition, of empathy, though Strange would never say it aloud.

He knew loss.

He knew fear —the kind that lived in your ribs, the kind that settled in your bones when you found something worth losing.

Something worth protecting.

Strange sighed. "She doesn’t know, does she?"

Loki’s smirk was softer now, his gaze flickering for just a moment in the direction the Ranger had gone. "No."

"Will you tell her?"

Loki chuckled, folding his arms. "And ruin the fun of having a secret?"

Strange shook his head. "This could backfire on you, you know."

"Oh, undoubtedly," Loki mused, voice casual. "But what is life without a little risk?"

Strange let out a slow exhale, rubbing his temple. "You're insufferable."

"And yet, here you stand, keeping my secret."

A long pause.

Then, Strange sighed. "I won't tell her."

Loki's smirk returned, sharper now. "Of course you won't."

Because if Stephen Strange had the power to do what Loki had done …

He would have done it too.

And Loki knew it .

The Ranger would never know.

Not unless she was placed in true danger, not unless the spell activated —pulling Loki to her side in an instant, no matter the cost.

Until then, she would live freely, as she always had.

She would never feel the weight of his protection.

Because she did not need to.

And Strange…

Strange would carry that knowledge with him.

An unspoken truth. A secret between two men who understood something that words would never need to say.

Because if Strange had the power to keep someone safe in this way …

He would have done it too.

And Loki knew it.

The question came long after their initial meeting.

Long after Stephen Strange had first sensed the undeniable weight of the spell Loki had woven into the Ranger's very being.

Long after he had chosen to keep that secret.

And yet—

It remained with him.

It gnawed at the edges of his thoughts, an unfinished puzzle that should have been beneath him, a mystery he should have been able to unravel —and yet he couldn't.

Ancient. Subtle. Absolute.

The kind of magic that should not exist, at least not in a form so perfectly concealed that even he could barely sense it.

But it did exist.

And it had been crafted by Loki.

The night was late.

The Sanctum Sanctorum was quiet, its halls humming with the faint remnants of protective wards, the ever-present energy of the relics housed within its walls.

Stephen sat in the library, fingers idly tracing the rim of a half-finished glass of whiskey, staring into the embers of the dying fire.

And then—

A flicker of magic. A subtle shift in the air. A presence that did not belong—yet one that was expected.

Stephen exhaled slowly.

"You know," he mused, not bothering to look up, "most people use doors."

A low chuckle answered. "Most people are dull."

Loki stood at the edge of the room, arms folded, amusement glinting in his sharp green eyes.

Stephen didn’t ask why he was here.

Maybe he knew—or maybe he was simply too tired to pretend he didn't.

He let out a slow breath, staring into his drink. "Teach me."

Loki arched a brow. "Oh? A demand, is it?"

Stephen finally turned his gaze toward him. "You know what I'm asking."

Loki smirked, but it wasn't the smirk of a trickster.

It was the smirk of a man who knew the weight of what he held—the weight of power.

"You wish to learn magic you were never meant to wield, "Loki murmured." To shape reality in ways even you do not yet understand."

"I wish to understand it."

Loki exhaled through his nose, stepping forward, his expression unreadable. "Tell me something, Strange."

Stephen leaned back slightly, watching him. "What?"

"Why do you want to know?" Loki's voice was too calm.

Too measured.

Stephen hesitated.

He could lie.

He could say it was simply curiosity, a desire for knowledge, an unwillingness to let something remain beyond his grasp.

But Loki…

Loki would see through it.

So instead—

He spoke the truth.

“Because if I had the power to do what you did… " His voice was quieter now, the weight of it heavier than before. "I would have used it."

Loki’s smirk faded.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke.

Then—Loki chuckled. A low, knowing sound, full of something not quite amusement, not quite sorrow.

"Ah, Stephen."

He turned, pacing slowly, hands clasped behind his back. "You wish to learn? Fine. I will teach you something."

Stephen straightened slightly, eyes sharp. "The spell?"

Loki glanced over his shoulder. "No."

Stephen frowned. "Then what—"

"Not all power is meant to be learned," Loki murmured, turning to face him fully. "But if you insist on understanding something greater than yourself, then I shall teach you something far more valuable than a spell, Strange."

Stephen narrowed his eyes. "And what would that be?"

Loki tilted his head, his smirk faint, but his eyes unreadable .

"How to accept that some things are beyond even you."

Silence.

Strange's jaw tightened . "You're enjoying this."

Loki chuckled. "Immensely."

Stephen let out a slow breath, frustration flickering across his features. "You won't teach me, then."

Loki's gaze darkened—not with amusement, but with something deeper.

"There are powers, Strange," he said softly, "that do not belong in your hands. Powers that do not care for your titles, nor for your intellect, nor for your endless pursuit of understanding."

He stepped forward, voice lowering.

"And the magic I have woven into her?" His head tilted. "That is not a lesson I am willing to give."

Stephen studied him for a long moment.

Then, finally—he nodded.

"Because if you had the power to do what I did," Loki murmured, "you would not stop at just one."

A flicker of something passed across Strange's face.

And Loki knew he was right .

Because he himself had been there once—desperate to hold on , to protect something he could not bear to lose.

Loki turned away, walking toward the shadows. "I have already done what you could not."

He smirked, glancing over his shoulder one last time.

"And that will have to be enough for you, Sorcerer Supreme."

And then—

He was gone.

Leaving Strange alone—

To wonder, to regret, and to understand.

Because Loki had been right.

If he had that power —

He would not have stopped at just one.

And that was why he would never learn it.

Stephen would never ask again.

Not because he did not want to know —

But because he knew better now .

And Loki…

Loki had already taught him more than he had ever intended to.

Because sometimes—

The greatest lesson is knowing when to let go.

And that was knowledge Stephen Strange would carry with him forever.

Stephen Strange was not accustomed to feeling small.

Not after everything he had endured.

Not after the battles fought, the sacrifices made, the universe-altering knowledge he had acquired.

And yet—

As he sat alone in the dimly lit Sanctum, whisky untouched, staring at the dying embers of the fire…

He felt it.

Not in the way a lesser sorcerer might—overwhelmed, defeated.

No, this was something different.

Something heavier.

Something uncomfortable.

Because this time, he had been the apprentice.

He had always believed he understood Loki.

Oh, he'd never trusted him—not fully. He wasn't foolish. Loki was a liar, a trickster, a chaos-born force wrapped in silver-tongued charm and unpredictability.

Strange had studied everything he could about him. The history of Asgard, the conflicts with Thor, the betrayals, the grand manipulations.

He had thought himself above Loki.

The Sorcerer Supreme. The protector of reality itself.

Loki was clever. But Stephen was wise.

Or so he had believed.

Until tonight.

Because tonight, Loki had taught him something.

And the worst part?

It had nothing to do with magic.

Stephen ran a hand down his face, exhaling slowly.

He hated this.

Not because he had been outmatched—not in power, not in skill.

But because Loki had done something infinitely worse.

He had understood him.

Completely.

And that—that was unacceptable.

Because Loki had been right.

Had Strange possessed the power to bind someone to him so absolutely, so subtly, so completely without their knowledge …

He would have done it.

Not for control.

Not for selfish gain.

But for love.

For fear.

Because the thought of losing someone—the thought of standing helpless while fate took and took and took …

It was unbearable.

Loki had seen it in him.

Had recognised it.

Because he had lived it, too.

And that was what unsettled Strange the most.

Not that Loki had power beyond his understanding.

But that he had wisdom beyond his own.

The fire crackled softly as Stephen sat motionless, staring at his own reflection in the whiskey glass.

He had spent years believing Loki was a fool.

A dangerous fool, but a fool nonetheless.

And yet—

When had the trickster become so measured? So deliberate?

When had he stepped beyond the games, beyond the chaos, beyond the need to prove himself —and simply become?

And how had Strange missed it?

The answer was simple.

Arrogance.

Stephen prided himself on being a man of knowledge. But knowledge was not wisdom.

And tonight, Loki had proven it.

Strange closed his eyes, letting out a slow, quiet chuckle.

Not one of amusement.

But of resignation.

He had spent so long thinking himself Loki's better.

And yet—

Tonight, he had been the student.

And Loki?

Loki had been the teacher.

That truth was a bitter pill .

But Stephen swallowed it nonetheless.

Because that …

That was the difference between him and those who clung to their illusions of superiority.

He had the strength to admit when he had been wrong.

Would he ever tell Loki this?

Would he ever admit that, for just this one moment, Loki had been right?

Not a chance in hell!

But in the quiet of the Sanctum, as the embers burned low and the weight of truth settled into his bones—

Stephen lifted the whiskey glass to his lips, took a slow sip, and gave the smallest nod to the empty room.

"Well played, Loki."

And though the God of Mischief was nowhere in sight, though he was likely galaxies away at that very moment…

Strange had the distinct, unsettling feeling that somewhere—

Loki was smirking.

4.

A Threat from before Time

The fire burned low in Loki's sanctuary, casting golden light against the stone walls. The Ranger was asleep—*truly* asleep—for the first time in far too long, her breath steady, her presence a quiet certainty in the space they had made their own.

Loki sat by the hearth, swirling a goblet of Asgardian wine, his gaze unreadable. His mind was *not* at ease.

Because something was *coming*.

He could feel it.

And if he could feel it, then so too could Strange.

That meant time was short.

Which meant…

He needed to ensure that she was safe.

And for that, he needed someone he *never* expected to ask for anything.

Someone who had once hated him.

Someone whose mind he had once twisted, whose *will* he had stolen, whose very soul he had bent to his own whims.

But that Loki was dead.

And this one…

This one owed a debt.

So, with the quiet hum of ancient magic, Loki sent his message into the void.

And Clint Barton—former assassin, former *enemy*, and now, an ally forged in reluctant trust—received it.

Clint sat alone in his safe-house, nursing a cup of coffee, when the flickering green shimmer of magic filled the dimly lit room.

He sighed heavily. "*Goddamn it.*"

"*Ah, Barton. Ever the poet.*"

Loki's voice was smooth, amused, and *dangerously calm*.

Clint exhaled slowly, rubbing his temple. "*Please tell me you're not here to kill me. Because if you are, at least let me finish my coffee first.*"

"*If I wanted you dead, I would have at least been creative about it.*"

"*Yeah, that's what I was afraid of.*" Clint leaned back, studying him warily. "*So what do you want?*"

Loki hesitated—just for a fraction of a second.

And Clint saw it.

The moment stretched between them.

Then, finally—

"*I need you to watch over someone for me.*"

Clint blinked. "*Come again?*"

"*You heard me, Barton.*" Loki's voice was measured, even, but there was something beneath it—something that was *not* arrogance, nor manipulation.

Something real.

"*I must leave. I do not know for how long.*" Loki's gaze flickered—just slightly—to the side, as if checking for something unseen. "*And she*—"

He stopped himself.

Clint caught it immediately. "*She?*"

"*Do not press.*" Loki's voice had an *edge* now, warning.

Clint let out a slow exhale, his mind piecing together the puzzle.

"*The Ranger.*"

Loki's eyes flicked back to him sharply, and for the first time in his life, Clint saw something he had never expected in those green depths.

Not amusement. Not mockery. Not manipulation.

Sincerity.

Loki trusted him.

And that? That was the most dangerous thing of all.

Clint ran a hand over his face, letting out a slow chuckle. "*You really are different now, aren't you?*"

Loki's smirk was sharp, but it did not reach his eyes. "*You have no idea.*"

A beat of silence.

Then—Clint sighed, shaking his head. "*Fine. I'll keep an eye on her.*"

Loki tilted his head. "*Without hesitation?*"

"*Oh, there's plenty of hesitation.*" Clint rolled his shoulders. "*But I've seen what happens when someone really pisses you off. So let's just say… I'd rather keep her safe than deal with that.*"

Loki smirked. "*A wise decision.*"

Kamar-Taj had always been a place of learning, of power —of forces both known and *unknown*.

And deep beneath its halls, Stephen Strange had found something.

Something buried.

Something forgotten.

Something that should have *never* been touched.

The relic was small, unassuming—almost *insignificant*. A simple black stone, no larger than a coin, sitting in the heart of an ancient altar beneath the Sanctum's deepest chambers.

But the moment Strange had touched it—

Everything changed.

The room had *bent* around him. The air had *shattered*, space *fracturing* like glass, reality *trembling*.

And the whispers—

The whispers had begun.

It spoke of the First Sorcerer.
It spoke of the Forgotten War.
It spoke of something that had *existed before time itself*—something that had been buried before the first gods had drawn breath.

And now?

Now, it had been found.

Strange barely managed to contain the ripple of destruction before it could spread.

But it was *too late*.

Because the whispers had already awoken something else.

Something waiting.

Something watching.

And Stephen Strange knew, with absolute certainty, that there was only one other person who could help him stop it.

One person who understood magic older than time.

One person who had danced on the edge of chaos itself and lived to tell the tale.

One person he *never wanted to owe anything to again*.

Loki.

Clint Barton was many things.

A former SHIELD agent. An Avenger. A survivor. A *damn* good archer.

But invisible?

Not so much.

Especially not here.

Loki's sanctuary was… *unnerving*, to say the least. It was quiet—too quiet for someone who had spent his life in the chaos of war zones, city streets, and battlefields.

The air carried a hum of magic, subtle but ever-present, like the world itself was watching.

And then there was her.

The Ranger.

He had expected her to be sleeping. That's what Loki had told him—watch over her, ensure she's safe.

And yet, here she was.

Standing right in front of him, two cups of coffee in her hands, her gaze sharp with amusement.

"*How long are you going to try blending into your surroundings, Clint?*" She raised a brow, smirking as she set one of the cups down on a nearby rock. "*I can see you as clearly as if you were the Hulk wearing a pink princess costume.*"

Clint sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "*Damn it.*"

He stepped out from where he had been watching—leaning against a tree just at the edge of the sanctuary's entrance.

"*Was worth a shot,*" he muttered, walking up and picking up the cup. He eyed her over the rim as he took a sip. "*So… what gave me away?*"

The Ranger tilted her head. "*You mean aside from the fact that I always know when I'm being watched?*"

Clint smirked. "*Yeah, yeah. Aside from that.*"

She took a slow sip of her own coffee before answering. "*You breathe like someone trying not to breathe. And you shift your weight in the exact same rhythm every forty seconds. That's a trained habit.*"

Clint blinked. "*You counted?*"

"*I got bored.*" She shrugged. "*So, what are you doing here, exactly? I doubt you just decided to take a nature retreat.*"

Clint sighed heavily, rolling his shoulders. "*Look, I'm not exactly thrilled about this either. But Loki asked me to keep an eye on you while he's off dealing with whatever magical nightmare is threatening to unravel reality this time.*"

Her smirk faltered just *slightly*. "*Loki asked you?*"

"*Yeah.*"

She studied him for a long moment, and Clint could practically feel the weight of her assessment.

Then—

She laughed.

Clint frowned. "*Okay, that is not the reaction I was expecting.*"

The Ranger grinned. "*I just find it hilarious that Loki of all people trusts you with anything remotely important.*"

Clint scoffed, taking another sip of coffee. "*Yeah, well… he and I have history.*"

"*Oh, I'm aware.*" Her voice was smooth, but there was a flicker of something else behind her gaze—curiosity.

Clint exhaled. "*And before you ask—no, I don't get it either.*" He gave her a sideways glance. "*But I figure if Loki is willing to trust me, I'd be a real idiot to throw that away.*"

Her expression softened just a *fraction*.

"*That's surprisingly wise for you, Barton.*"

"*Don't get used to it.*"

They stood in comfortable silence for a moment, both sipping their coffee.

Then the Ranger smirked again. "*So what now? Are you just going to stand outside and pretend to be a guardian statue?*"

Clint narrowed his eyes. "*I could do that.*"

"*You could try.*"

"*I could set up a perimeter.*"

"*Unnecessary.*"

"*I could—*"

"*Or you could just come inside and have breakfast like a normal person instead of lurking in the woods like some sort of cryptid.*"

Clint sighed heavily. "*You're going to make this difficult, aren't you?*"

The Ranger grinned. "*You have no idea.*"

Clint huffed, shaking his head. "*Fine. But if Loki shows up and stabs me for sitting in his chair, I'm blaming you.*"

"*Deal.*"

And with that, the two unlikely allies walked inside, leaving the morning air behind—one step closer to *understanding*each other, and one step further into whatever madness awaited them next.

Kamar-Taj was a sanctuary of knowledge. A place where sorcerers trained their minds, honed their power, and studied the forces that governed the universe.

But tonight—

Tonight, it was a tomb of whispers.

Stephen Strange stood in the heart of the underground chamber, the flickering light of conjured sigils casting eerie shadows against the stone walls.

Before him, on a pedestal of obsidian-black rock, sat the artifact.

Small. Unassuming.

And yet—

It felt wrong.

Like it should not *exist*.

Like it had been pulled from a time before time.

The stone pulsed faintly, its surface like the reflection of a starless void. Strange had seen many things—things that defied reason, things that bent reality, things that men were never meant to wield.

But this?

This was different.

Because when he had touched it—

The voices had begun.

"You are not ready."
"It is waking."
"He will come."

The voices slithered through the air, not loud, not screaming—just *present*. A thousand whispers, layered atop one another, never quite clear enough to be fully understood.

Strange clenched his jaw, forcing his breathing to remain steady.

He had contained it, barely. His magic still circled the artefact in shimmering, golden rings—restraining the *thing* from spreading whatever influence it carried.

But something had changed.

The moment he had touched it, the magic of Kamar-Taj had shifted—like the very walls of reality had trembled for just a fraction of a second.

Something had noticed.

And now?

Now, it was only a matter of time.

Strange exhaled slowly, dragging a hand down his face. "*Great. Another apocalyptic threat before breakfast.*"

He turned away from the artefact, beginning to pace. His mind raced, trying to place it—to categorise what he was dealing with.

But no matter how far back he searched—through the tomes of the Vishanti, through the knowledge left behind by the Ancient One, through even the forbidden texts—

There was nothing.

No record of such an object.

No trace of its origin.

And that?

That was the most dangerous thing of all.

Strange stopped pacing.

His fingers flexed at his sides.

He knew what he had to do.

And he hated it.

There were very few people in the universe who had a deep enough knowledge of primal, ancient magic to even begin to comprehend what he was dealing with.

One was Wong, but even he was limited to the teachings of Kamar-Taj.

Another was Scarlet Witch—but… well.

That left exactly one other person.

A *pain in the ass*.

A *nightmare in green and gold*.

A wild card in every sense of the word.

Strange sighed heavily, pressing his fingers to his temple. "*Dammit, Loki.*"

He reached out, forming a complex sigil in the air—one designed specifically to send a message across realms, across worlds, directly to one specific recipient.

The air crackled with golden light, and Strange exhaled slowly before speaking the words that would send the message across the void.

"*Loki. We have a problem.*"

A pause.

Then, with just a *little* bitterness—

"*And I need your help.*"

The moment the message left Strange's lips, the air shifted.

And not because of the spell.

It was… *something else*.

A pressure in the space around him.

Like the *world itself* had reacted.

And then—

Green light.

A swirling shimmer of magic, twisting into the space just beyond the pedestal, forming a shape, a presence, a figure that stood there as if he had *always* been meant to arrive at that exact moment.

And there he was.

Loki.

His arms were folded, his expression far too smug, and Strange immediately regretted everything.

Loki arched a brow. "*Strange,*" he mused, his tone silken with amusement. "*What an unexpected delight.*"

Strange scowled. "*I swear to God, if you say 'I told you so,' I will—*"

"*Ah, ah, ah,*" Loki interrupted, stepping forward, his emerald gaze flickering to the artefact. "*Before we get into your delightful little threats, perhaps you should tell me what exactly you have disturbed.*"

Strange hesitated.

Loki tilted his head, a slow smirk curling his lips. "*Oh, Strange. You look… concerned.*"

Strange exhaled sharply. "*That's because I am.*"

Loki's smirk vanished.

And that?

That was how Strange knew things were about to get *so much worse*.

Loki's smirk was gone.

That alone was enough to make every nerve in Strange's body tense.

The God of Mischief never *lost* his smirk—not when he was playing a game, not when he was standing before an enemy, not even when the world was quite literally collapsing around him.

And yet—

As he looked at the artefact—stared at it, unblinking, as if seeing something no one else could—

His expression darkened.

Something cold settled in the room.

Strange felt it too—an instinct, something in his bones that told him they had gone too far.

Loki exhaled slowly, his eyes narrowing just slightly. "*You touched it.*"

It wasn't a question.

Strange crossed his arms, forcing himself to remain calm. "*Yeah. And?*"

Loki's gaze flicked to him, something unreadable in his expression. "*And now it has found you.*"

The words settled into the air like a curse.

Strange's jaw clenched. "*What does that mean?*"

Loki finally looked away from the artefact, his fingers twitching as if resisting the urge to reach for it.

"*There are things in this universe,*" Loki said quietly, "*older than time itself. Older than gods, older than magic as we understand it.*"

Strange frowned. "*I've studied the oldest records of Kamar-Taj, the Celestials, even the Vishanti. If this thing was as ancient as you're implying, it would have been—*"

"*It is not recorded.*"

The way Loki said it—so certain, so absolute—made Strange pause.

"*Why?*"

Loki's gaze flickered, his voice quieter now. "*Because it was meant to be forgotten.*"

Strange's blood ran cold.

Strange took a step closer to the pedestal. "*Loki, what the hell is this thing?*"

Loki didn't answer.

His eyes remained locked onto Strange—studying him, *assessing* him.

And that was when Strange felt it.

A shift.

Something beneath his skin.

Like an echo of something that was not his own.

A whisper.

So soft. So distant.

"Mine."

Strange inhaled sharply, his fingers twitching as if something had just brushed against the edges of his mind.

"*What—*"

"*It has already begun,*" Loki murmured.

Strange's pulse pounded in his ears. "*What has begun?*"

Loki's gaze was sharp, knowing, ancient. "*It did not wake because it was found.*"

A beat of silence.

Then—

"*It woke because you touched it.*"

Strange staggered back a step.

No. No, that wasn't possible. He had *contained* it. He had sealed it with magic the moment he had realised something was wrong.

This wasn't how magic worked.

Was it?

"*Don't be ridiculous,*" Strange snapped, forcing himself back into control. "*It's bound. I put wards around it. It's not spreading—*"

"*You do not understand,*" Loki interrupted, his voice too calm, too quiet.

"*Then explain it to me,*" Strange growled.

Loki tilted his head. "*Would you like the truth, Strange?*"

Strange clenched his fists. "*I wouldn't have asked for your help if I didn't.*"

Loki exhaled, looking almost… *sympathetic*.

Then—

"*It is not coming for you, Sorcerer Supreme.*"

Strange frowned. "*Then what*—"

"*It is coming from you.*"

The room plunged into silence.

The moment the words left Loki's lips, Strange felt it.

Not an attack.

Not an invasion.

A presence.

Inside him.

Like something watching.

Something waiting.

Something that had been asleep for eons—and now, because of him, it had opened its eyes.

His breath hitched.

"*Loki—*"

Loki stepped forward, slow, deliberate, his voice dangerously calm.

"*Tell me, Strange.*"

Strange's chest felt *tight*, something pressing just beneath his ribs, curling in the edges of his vision.

Loki's gaze bore into him.

"*When was the last time you looked in a mirror?*"

A pulse echoed in his skull.

Strange inhaled sharply, his fingers twitching, his thoughts fracturing for just a moment.

And for the briefest second—

His reflection did not move.

Strange's heart slammed against his ribs.

His breath caught—just for a second, just a flicker—before he reasserted control, forcing his mind to focus, to *fight*.

He looked back at Loki, his voice steady, but barely.

"*What is happening to me?*"

Loki's gaze did not waver.

"*You have been marked, Strange.*"

The words felt heavier than they should have.

Strange's jaw clenched. "*Marked by what?*"

Loki's expression was unreadable.

"*Something that should never have been woken.*"

A pause.

Then, softer—

"*And now, it is inside you.*"

The silence between them stretched—thick, heavy, *unrelenting*.

Strange's pulse pounded, the weight of Loki's words settling into his chest like a slowly tightening noose.

"You have been marked."
"It is inside you."

No.

That wasn't possible.

Magic could corrupt. It could twist and taint, it could alter and bend—but it did not do this.

Did it?

Strange clenched his fists, jaw tightening. "*Enough riddles, Loki.*"

Loki tilted his head, studying him, his expression unreadable. "*Ah, but you misunderstand, Strange.*" His

voice was smooth, too smooth. "*This is not a riddle. This is a mercy.*"

"*Mercy?*" Strange *almost* laughed, though there was nothing humorous in it. "*You call this mercy?*"

Loki took a slow step forward. "*I could tell you everything,*" he murmured. "*But the moment I do… you will be lost.*"

A chill slithered down Strange's spine.

His instincts—his *hard-earned*, sharpened instincts—told him Loki wasn't lying.

And that?

That was *worse* than any trickery he could have expected.

Loki did know.

Not just a piece of the puzzle, not just some fragment of forgotten lore.

He knew exactly what was happening.

Exactly what had been waiting.

Exactly why it had stirred.

And exactly why he could not speak its name.

Because to name it, to acknowledge it, was to give it power.

And Strange was already marked.

If he said its name…

If he even hinted at the depth of what was unfolding…

It would wake fully.

Not in some distant realm.

Not in the void beyond time.

But inside Stephen Strange himself.

Loki inhaled slowly, measuring his words before he spoke again. "*You need to listen to me carefully, Strange.*"

His voice had changed.

Gone was the amusement. The arrogance. The ever-present mischief.

In its place was something rare.

Something dangerous.

Something like fear.

"*This thing—the one that now watches from beneath your skin?*" Loki's voice lowered, dark, careful. "*It was never meant to be found.*"

Strange forced himself to breathe evenly. "*Then what is it?*"

Loki hesitated.

Then—

"*An old god.*"

The words hit like thunder, rippling through the air, the very room seeming to flinch at their weight.

Strange went still.

"*Impossible.*" His voice was quiet, but sharp. "*I've studied the old gods. The Vishanti, the Elder Gods, the Celestials, the primordial forces—*"

"*And yet,*" Loki interrupted, his emerald eyes dark, "*you have never heard of this one.*"

Strange stared at him.

And deep down, he already *knew* what Loki was about to say.

"*Because it was erased.*"

Loki nodded slowly. "*Not sealed. Not bound. Not cast into some prison between realms.*"

His gaze flickered—*just slightly*—to the artifact, its black surface pulsing faintly, as if it were… *breathing.*

"*It was erased from history. From time itself. From memory. From existence.*"

A slow exhale.

"*And yet,*" Loki murmured, tilting his head, "*you found it.*"

Strange's stomach turned. "*Not found.*" His fingers curled into his palm. "*It found me.*"

Loki's expression did not change. "*Exactly.*"

Strange had spent years studying the impossible.

He had battled Dormammu in the Dark Dimension. He had walked through time, defied fate, unraveled the very fabric of what *should* be possible.

But this?

This was something else.

He stepped forward, slowly, deliberately, forcing his mind to work. "*You said it was erased from history. By who?*"

Loki's gaze flickered.

Then, quietly—

"*By the gods themselves.*"

The weight of that sentence settled like an earthquake.

Strange swallowed hard. "*Why?*"

A long pause.

Then—

"*Because it was the first.*"

Strange blinked. "*The first what?*"

Loki's jaw tightened just slightly. "*The first god.*"

Silence.

Strange's pulse pounded in his ears. "*That's not possible.*"

Loki let out a quiet breath. "*And yet, here we are.*"

The shadows in the room seemed deeper now.

The whispers in the air thicker.

Something coiled in the back of Strange's mind—
something he could not shake.

"Mine."

His fingers twitched.

His breath staggered.

Loki noticed immediately.

"*Strange.*"

The sorcerer lifted his gaze, something flickering behind his eyes that did not belong.

Loki stepped forward. "*You need to control this. Now.*"

Strange exhaled sharply, forcing himself back into focus.
"*I am in control.*"

"*Are you?*" Loki's voice was low, almost testing.

A pause.

Then—

"*Look at your hands.*"

Strange did not want to look.

He already *felt it*.

But he did.

And when he saw them—

His breath caught.

Because *his fingertips were darkening*.

Not burned.

Not stained.

But as if the void itself was creeping into his skin.

As if he was already being rewritten.

And deep within his mind, a voice not his own whispered —

"I see you."

The shadows coiled around the edges of the room, thick and whispering, curling like unseen tendrils that pressed against the fabric of reality itself.

The air was *wrong*.

Not just heavy. Not just dark.

It was shifting.

Changing.

Like the very concept of space was bending around him.

Strange.

Loki saw it.

Felt it.

The hum of power that was not his own, but something deeper. Something that slithered beneath the skin of the universe, brushing against the threads of existence as if testing how easily they could be unwoven.

And it was inside Strange now.

The mark had settled.

And something was waking.

Strange clenched his jaw, forcing his breathing to stay even, his pulse steady—but he could feel it.

A presence.

Not pushing.

Not pulling.

Simply… *watching.*

Waiting.

"I see you."

The whisper coiled in the back of his mind, slow and languid, like something stretching for the first time in eons, tasting the power in his veins.

His fingers twitched, the darkness at his fingertips *flickering*, crawling up toward his wrists.

No.

No.

He was Sorcerer Supreme.

He had mastered the Mystic Arts.

He had bent time, defied fate, stood against Dormammu himself—

He would *not* be undone.

His eyes snapped up to Loki. "*Fix it.*"

Loki tilted his head. "*You assume it can be fixed.*"

A muscle in Strange's jaw twitched. "*Don't play with me, Loki.*"

Loki chuckled—low, almost pitying. "*Strange,*" he murmured, stepping forward, his voice dropping into something almost gentle, "*this is not a game.*"

Strange's breath hitched.

Loki's gaze flickered to his hands—the creeping blackness, the way the lines of his skin were beginning to blur, like reality itself was starting to rewrite him.

"*This is the beginning,*" Loki continued, his voice quiet, measured. "*And once something has begun…*"

He let the sentence linger.

Strange exhaled sharply. "*You're telling me I can't stop this.*"

Loki's smirk was gone. "*I'm telling you it has already started.*"

The silence stretched tight between them.

Then—

The world rippled.

A pulse.

Not from the artefact.

From Strange.

Loki felt it first.

The way the air shuddered around them.

The way the very fabric of space trembled—not *violently*, not *chaotically*—but in anticipation.

Something was shifting.

Something was recognising.

Something was waking up.

And Loki knew what it meant.

"*Strange,*" Loki said carefully, "*you need to get control of yourself.*"

Strange's breathing was sharper now, shallower, his fingers clenching as he fought something unseen.

He could feel it settling in his bones.

A force that was not his own.

A presence that was older than time, stretching into his very essence, testing, learning, adapting.

Not *attacking*.

Not *corrupting*.

Simply… tasting.

"Ahhh… you will do nicely."

Strange's pulse slammed against his ribs.

No.

No.

His hand flew up, golden magic crackling between his fingers as he tried to burn it out, cast it out, fight it off—

But nothing happened.

The magic flared—but the creeping black did not retreat.

It did not fight back.

It simply stayed.

Settled.

Rooted.

And *laughed.*

Loki moved fast.

Faster than Strange expected, faster than he should have been able to.

A flick of his wrist, a pulse of emerald light—

And suddenly the world snapped back into focus.

Strange inhaled sharply, like he had just broken the surface after nearly drowning, his vision blurring as he struggled to regain control.

The dark lines creeping along his hands halted—but they did not retreat.

He swallowed, dragging a trembling hand down his face. "*What the hell was that?*"

Loki watched him carefully. "*That was the first taste.*"

Strange clenched his teeth. "*It's trying to take me.*"

Loki's head tilted slightly. "*No.*"

A flicker of confusion flashed through Strange's expression. "*Then what—*"

"*It is choosing you.*"

A beat of silence.

Then—

Cold realisation sank into Strange's ribs.

This wasn't a possession.

It wasn’t an attack.

It was a bond.

Something ancient, deliberate, methodical.

Something older than time had words for.

Loki took a slow step forward, voice lowering. "*Do you understand now, Sorcerer Supreme?*"

Strange’s fingers twitched. "*Understand what?*"

Loki exhaled.

"*This is not a battle you can fight.*"

Strange’s breath was shallow. "*Then what do I do?*"

Loki’s expression was impossible to read.

Then—

"*You learn how to survive it.*"

Strange is no longer just Stephen Strange.

Something has claimed him.

Not as prey.

Not as an enemy.

But as a vessel.

And Loki knows exactly what that means.

But how much can he reveal?

How much dare he say?

Because if he tells Strange the *whole truth*…

Then the First God will finally wake.

And the world will never be the same.

The Sorcerer's Defiance

Stephen Strange was many things.

A surgeon. A sorcerer. A protector of reality itself.

But above all else—

He was stubborn.

He had clawed his way back from ruin before. From the shattered remains of his hands, from the brink of oblivion, from battles that had rewritten the fate of the universe itself.

And if this thing—this ancient, lurking force—thought it could claim him without a fight?

It was dead wrong.

"*No.*"

Loki arched a brow, folding his arms. "*No?*"

"*I don't accept this.*" Strange's voice was sharp, his breathing uneven, but his eyes were fierce. "*You said this isn't a battle I can fight. I don't care.*"

Loki sighed, tilting his head slightly. "*How utterly predictable.*"

"*This is my mind.*" Strange's fingers curled, magic flickering against his skin like a warning, golden light crackling as he forced himself to push back against the thing coiling inside him. "*And I will not let it take me.*"

Loki's smirk flickered, but there was something else in his gaze now.

Something like recognition.

Like he had seen this before.

And *he had*.

Not with Strange.

With himself.

Loki knew this game.

He had lived it.

Had felt it—the slow unraveling of self, the creeping tendrils of something that did not belong, whispering in the back of his mind, rewriting his thoughts before he even knew they had changed.

And he had learned the truth.

This was not a battle won through defiance.

It was not a war where victory meant resistance.

No.

It was a game of survival.

And the first rule of survival?

You do not fight the storm.

You learn to bend with the wind.

"*Strange,*" Loki said carefully, "*I admire your stubbornness—*"

"*Then help me!*" Strange's eyes burned with frustration, with fear, with the kind of fury that only came from standing on the edge of losing yourself. "*Tell me how to get rid of it.*"

Loki hesitated.

Just for a fraction of a second.

But Strange saw it.

"*You know something.*" His voice dropped, dangerously sharp. "*Tell me.*"

Loki exhaled, rubbing his fingers together slowly, thoughtfully. "*You think knowledge will save you.*"

"*It always has before.*"

Loki chuckled darkly. "*Then this will be the exception that finally humbles you.*"

Strange's eyes narrowed. "*Loki—*"

"*You do not get to know everything, Strange.*"

Strange stilled.

There was something different in Loki's tone now.

Something serious.

Something dangerous.

Loki's green eyes met his—steady, unwavering.
"*Because if I tell you the truth—*"

A slow, deliberate pause.

"*—then it will hear me.*"

The words hit like a crack of thunder.

Strange felt his breath catch, felt the unseen weight of something watching, something waiting, something pressing against the edges of reality like a thing waiting to be acknowledged.

And Loki—

Loki knew.

Because the moment he said the wrong words, the moment he gave Strange the name, the knowledge, the shape of what had claimed him—

It would wake.

Not slowly.

Not subtly.

But fully.

And Strange would no longer be just Strange.

Loki tilted his head, his smirk returning—but it was sharp now. Cold. Purposeful.

"*So choose, Sorcerer Supreme.*"

His voice was soft, but heavy.

"*Do you want knowledge?*"

A pause.

"*Or do you want to survive?*"

Strange's mind raced.

He wanted to demand answers.

He wanted to *rip them from Loki's throat* if he had to.

But he wasn't a fool.

Something had shifted in the air the moment Loki had hesitated.

Something was listening.

And if he asked the wrong question—

If Loki gave the wrong answer—

Then this game would be over before it had even begun.

Strange took a slow breath.

Then—

"*Then what do I do?*"

Loki watched him.

Then, with the smallest smirk—

"*Ah, finally. The right question.*"

Loki's smirk was subtle—barely there—but Strange saw it.

And that?

That was enough to make every nerve in his body tighten.

Because *of course*.

Of course Loki had known more than he let on.

Of course he had kept something hidden, something waiting, something that Strange had not seen until now.

Loki was a liar. A trickster. A fraud.

But was he really?

Because if Loki was smiling at a time like this—

Then that meant he had already planned for what came next.

And that was terrifying.

The whispers sharpened.

Not soft. Not slithering.

This time, they ripped through the air like shattered glass, a hum vibrating deep in Strange's bones, his vision blurring at the edges as something pushed past the veil…

Something ancient.

Something that should not be.

Something waking.

"You see now."

The voice was not a whisper anymore.

It was a presence.

It was a weight, pressing down on Strange's very existence, on the air itself, on the walls of Kamar-Taj that had never known such power before.

It was here.

It was real.

It had found him.

And it was stepping through.

The air rippled as reality shuddered, a shape forming—not solid, not entirely *there*, but vast, stretching past dimensions, past time, past anything Strange could comprehend.

And it was looking at him.

"Yes. You will do."

A pulse.

A beat of silence.

And then—

Loki moved.

Loki did not hesitate.

A flick of his wrist. A pulse of magic so old, so pure that it did not look like his usual power—

And suddenly—

The space around them bent.

Not like a shield.

Not like an attack.

But like a countermeasure.

A force equal to what had just stepped into the room.

And that—

That should not have been possible.

Strange gasped as he was forced back into himself, the pressure lifting, the whispers dissolving—

And for the first time since he had been marked—

The First God faltered.

Not because of Strange.

Not because of anything he had done.

But because of Loki.

Strange staggered, his vision still swimming, his pulse pounding.

But Loki—

Loki was calm.

Steady.

His magic held against the weight of the First God's presence, matched it, shaped itself against it, like something that should not exist, yet did.

Something new.

Something old.

Something that did not belong to Loki alone.

Strange saw it now.

Saw the way Loki's magic had shifted.

It wasn't just the seething emerald of Asgardian power.

It wasn't just the chaotic mischief that had always followed him like a second skin.

It was something deeper.

Something woven into his very being.

Something that pulsed with a different kind of bond—

A bond not meant for him alone.

And then—

Strange understood.

The protection spell.

The one Loki had placed upon the Ranger.

It had been perfect. Hidden. Untouchable.

But magic—true, ancient magic—never came without a cost.

And Loki—so smug, so certain in his own skill—had not realised the price until now.

He had woven himself into it.

Not just a guardian.

Not just a tether.

But a counterbalance.

And now?

Now, when the First God tried to break through, to reshape Strange into something new—

It had been met with resistance.

Because Loki had already rewritten the rules.

He had unknowingly become something else.

Something that could challenge the First God itself.

And for the first time in its endless existence—

It hesitated.

Loki's smirk returned slowly.

A dangerous, knowing thing.

He turned his gaze to Strange, who was still recovering from what had just happened, and said, far too smoothly…

"*You didn't actually think I came here unprepared, did you?*"

Strange clenched his jaw, forcing himself to breathe evenly. "*What… the hell… was that?*"

Loki's eyes flickered, green and gold light still crackling at his fingertips.

"*A reminder,*" he murmured, "*that I do not play by the same rules as you, Strange.*"

His gaze shifted—just slightly—toward the fractured space where the First God had tried to push through.

It was still watching.

Still there.

But it had stopped advancing.

Because now, it was assessing.

Now, it had seen something it did not expect.

And Loki had its attention.

Strange wiped a hand across his face, his mind racing.

Loki had not countered the First God.

He had not banished it, or sealed it, or destroyed it.

But he had done something far more dangerous.

He had made it hesitate.

And if something that old, that powerful, that erased-from-existence itself was uncertain of what it was facing…

That meant Loki was now an unknown variable.

That meant he had power that had not existed before.

Power that was not entirely his own.

Strange exhaled sharply. "*Loki… what did you do?*"

Loki's smirk was calculated now. Careful.

Because he knew the answer now.

Knew why his magic had responded.

Knew what had changed.

And deep in his bones—

He realised that he had become something else entirely.

Because the spell he had woven into the Ranger had done more than protect her.

It had changed him.

And now—

The First God wanted to know why.

Loki could feel it now.

The hum beneath his skin. The pulse of something ancient—something woven into him without his knowing.

It wasn't Asgardian magic.

It wasn't trickery.

It was pure balance.

A force so absolute, so deliberate, that even the First God had hesitated before stepping further.

And now, it watched him.

Waiting.

Testing.

Because even it did not know the full extent of what had been awakened.

But Loki did.

And for the first time in a very, very long time…

Loki was afraid.

Not for himself.

But for her.

Because the power had not come from nowhere.

It had not simply *appeared* within him.

It had been forged.

And if it was used—

If he unleashed it fully—

It would be gone.

Forever.

The spell on the Ranger? That would remain. He had cast it well. It was part of her very essence now.

But this?

This was different.

This was his.

Something that had only surfaced because he needed it most.

And if he used it—

If he chose to burn it all at once to seal the First God away—

He would never be able to protect her like this again.

Not with this power.

Not with this strength.

This was a one-time gift.

A single chance.

And once it was gone, it was gone forever.

Loki’s breath was steady, but his mind was not.

He saw the choice before him.

And it was a cruel one.

If he did nothing, the First God would slowly consume Strange from within, shape him into something new, something itself—and nothing could stop what would come next.

But if Loki unleashed what lay inside him…

The cost would be final.

No second chances.

No way to undo it.

No way to reclaim it.

He would still be *Loki*.

Still be a sorcerer. A trickster. A god.

But this power—this piece of something deeper than himself—would be erased.

And the next time she was in danger?

He would not be able to protect her like this again.

His jaw tightened.

Because it wasn't really a choice at all, was it?

He had already made it.

The moment she had become part of his world, the moment she had called him by his name, the moment she had trusted him…

He had already chosen.

And now?

Now, he would pay the price.

Strange saw it.

He was still catching his breath, still stabilising from the weight of what had nearly overtaken him.

But he was no fool.

He saw the tension in Loki's shoulders, the way his fingers twitched, the way his gaze darkened with something Strange had never seen before.

Loki—always so smug, always so unreadable, always holding the upper hand—

Was hesitating.

And Strange knew why.

Because Loki had lied.

Not with his words.

But with his silence.

Strange exhaled slowly, rubbing his temple. "*You knew this would happen.*"

Loki didn't deny it.

"*You knew what this thing was all along.*"

Again, no denial.

Strange clenched his jaw. "*And you knew you'd have to be the one to stop it.*"

Loki finally looked at him.

And Strange—brilliant, stubborn, sharp-eyed Strange—saw the truth.

Saw the choice that had already been made.

Saw the cost that Loki had already accepted.

And suddenly—

He hated it.

"*No.*"

Loki arched a brow. "*No?*"

"*You're not doing this.*"

Loki tilted his head. "*Strange, you seem to be under the impression that you have a say in the matter.*"

Strange stepped forward. "*I don't need to have a say. I just need to stop you.*"

Loki chuckled—but there was no amusement in it. "*And how do you plan to do that, dear Sorcerer Supreme?*"

Strange clenched his fists. "*You said this isn't a fight I can win. That I can't stop this thing. But if you use whatever the hell it is that's inside you, you won't be able to—*"

"*Yes.*"

The single word froze Strange in place.

Because Loki knew exactly what he was sacrificing.

And he was doing it anyway.

Loki turned to face the shifting void of the First God, the fractured reality it had already begun to rewrite, the slow press of something that should not be.

And then, he let go.

His eyes glowed.

Not green.

Not golden.

But something new.

Something ancient.

Something final.

The magic unraveled from him, spilling out, coiling, shaping into something that could not be named, something that did not belong to any god, any realm, any history that had ever been written.

And then—

He spoke the words.

The words that should not have existed.

The words that were older than time.

The words that had been waiting for him.

And the universe shook.

A single pulse rippled outward—

And the First God screamed.

Not in rage.

Not in pain.

But in realisation.

Because it had never expected this.

Never anticipated that something as *small, as insignificant* as a trickster god would have the power to stand against it.

It fought—but it was too late.

Loki had already sealed its fate.

The void collapsed in on itself, twisting, bending, breaking apart at the seams of its own existence—

And then—

Silence.

The air was still.

The universe had rebalanced itself.

Strange staggered, his body barely holding itself together after standing so close to something that should never have been woken.

But when he looked up—

Loki was on his knees.

His hands were shaking.

And Strange knew.

Knew what had happened.

Knew what it had cost.

Knew that Loki had burned away something irreplaceable.

Something that had once made him invincible.

And now?

Now, he was just Loki again.

The spell on the Ranger would hold.

But never again would he be able to do what he had just done.

His one chance had been used.

And he had chosen to spend it.

For her.

The sanctuary was quiet.

Too quiet.

Loki sat by the hearth, fingers absently running over the goblet of wine he had yet to drink, his emerald gaze lost in the flickering flames.

The battle had been won.

The First God was sealed.

Strange had recovered, begrudgingly accepting that Loki had saved both of them—but at a cost.

And now?

Now, he was waiting.

Because he knew she would come.

He knew she would ask.

Not because she was entitled to answers.

But because she knew him too well not to see the truth.

And Loki—clever, careful Loki—had not yet decided how much he was willing to tell.

Not because he wanted to lie.

But because he did not yet know the truth himself.

Because the power should have been gone.

And yet…

Even now, he could feel it.

Not burning. Not thrumming beneath his skin as it had in that moment.

But dormant.

Waiting.

As if it had only retreated.

As if it had only gone back to sleep.

The soft sound of footsteps pulled him from his thoughts.

Loki did not turn.

He did not have to.

He knew it was her.

The Ranger stepped forward silently, her movements measured, careful.

But not hesitant.

Not uncertain.

She knew him too well for that.

And when she finally spoke—

It was not to demand answers.

It was not to ask him why.

It was only—

"*You look like you could use company.*"

Loki huffed a quiet laugh, shaking his head. "*Do I now?*"

She sat beside him, not too close, but close enough.

She did not press.

She did not question.

And that?

That was why he had chosen *her.*

Because she knew.

She saw him.

And she did not need to hear the words to understand what they meant.

A long silence stretched between them.

Then, softly—

"*You lost something.*"

Loki's fingers tightened around his goblet just slightly.

He let out a slow breath. "*Yes.*"

The Ranger nodded, as if she had already known. "*Was it worth it?*"

A long pause.

Then—

"*Yes.*"

She tilted her head, studying him. "*And will you tell me why?*"

Loki finally looked at her, his expression calm, his smirk faint.

"*I stumbled upon something ancient,*" he said smoothly, "*something that should have remained hidden. It was a power I could wield—but only once. And now, it is gone.*"

A lie, wrapped in a truth.

Because the power was not gone.

Not entirely.

But Loki did not control it.

And he never had.

The Ranger held his gaze for a long moment, searching.

Loki waited.

Waited for her to challenge him. To demand more.

But instead—

She only nodded.

"*Then that is enough for me.*"

Loki blinked.

She did not push.

She did not press.

She simply accepted it.

Accepted him.

Because she knew.

She knew there was a deeper reason.

And she did not need to hear it to trust that he had chosen well.

Loki exhaled slowly, setting his goblet down, rolling his shoulders as if to shake off the weight of something unseen.

"*You are a strange creature,*" he murmured.

The Ranger smirked. "*So are you.*"

Loki chuckled, shaking his head. "*That, my love, is very true.*"

They sat in companionable silence, the fire crackling softly, the air lighter than before.

But deep within him—

The power waited.

Not gone.

Not lost.

Only dormant.

Only asleep.

Because it had never belonged to him.

Not really.

It had simply been waiting for the right moment to be used.

And when that moment came again—

It would decide.

Not him.

Not fate.

But the will of something greater.

Because Loki had not taken this power.

It had chosen him.

And one day—

It would choose again.

The fire crackled softly, its golden light casting long shadows against the stone walls of Loki's sanctuary. The night had settled in, the waterfall outside whispering in the distance, the world finally still after the storm that had passed.

Loki sat in his usual chair, one leg draped lazily over the armrest, his goblet of Asgardian wine resting on his knee. His expression was unreadable, but the tension in his shoulders betrayed him.

He was tired.

Not in the way a mortal man might be after a long day, but in the way a god might be after wielding forces beyond even his understanding.

The Ranger saw it.

Saw the way he carried it—this weight, this exhaustion that settled in his bones, in his very being.

And tonight?

Tonight, she would not let him carry it alone.

"*You are tense.*"

Loki blinked, glancing at her over the rim of his goblet. "*Am I?*"

She arched a brow, crossing her arms. "*Don't play coy with me, Loki. I can see it.*"

He smirked, swirling the wine in his cup. "*Perhaps I simply enjoy looking brooding and mysterious.*"

"*Or perhaps you are terrible at hiding when something weighs on you.*"

Loki's smirk faltered for half a second—barely noticeable—but the Ranger caught it.

He sighed dramatically, setting his goblet down. "*Ah, you wound me, truly. Are you suggesting I am incapable of deception?*"

"*No,*" she said smoothly, stepping toward him, "*I am suggesting that I know you too well for it to work on me.*"

Loki chuckled, shaking his head. "*You are insufferable.*"

"*And you are tense.*"

She placed her hands on his shoulders, fingers pressing lightly against the stiffness in his muscles.

And that?

That shut him up instantly.

Loki had faced battles.

He had stood before celestial forces, defied gods, rewritten fate itself.

But this?

This was something else entirely.

The moment her fingers dug in, working through the knots of tension that coiled beneath his skin, he let out a slow breath—longer than he meant to.

The Ranger smirked. "*Ah. So the great Loki does have weak spots.*"

He hummed in response, his usual quick wit noticeably absent.

She worked slowly, methodically, kneading the muscles at the base of his neck, moving up along his scalp, letting her fingers do their quiet magic.

And Loki—for once in his life—let himself be still.

"*You carry too much,*" she murmured, her touch gentle but firm. "*You always do.*"

Loki exhaled slowly. "*What else would you have me do?*"

"*Let someone else carry it with you.*"

His eyes flickered open just slightly, glancing at her.

She met his gaze.

And that—

That was enough to silence whatever sharp remark had been forming on his lips.

Because she meant it.

Because she had always meant it.

And for the first time in a very long time, Loki let himself believe it.

The massage lasted longer than she expected.

Not because she was trying to prolong it—

But because Loki had not stopped her.

His sharp tongue, his endless quips, his mischief—all of it had fallen silent beneath the slow, steady rhythm of her hands.

And when she finally pulled away, Loki blinked as if waking from a dream.

He rolled his shoulders, testing them, then let out a satisfied sigh. "*Alright, I suppose I will allow you to do that again.*"

The Ranger smirked. "*Generous of you.*"

Loki smirked in return. "*I am known for my kindness.*"

She nudged him lightly, rolling her eyes. "*Come on. Food, then wine, then sleep. I won't let you argue.*"

"*Bossy,*" Loki mused, standing to follow her. "*I rather like it.*"

She chuckled, shaking her head as she led him toward the kitchen, the warmth of their shared moment lingering in the air like the embers of a dying fire.

Dinner was simple, hearty, warm.

Loki ate without complaint, savouring the flavours, the comfort of it, the fact that for the first time in what felt like centuries, he did not have to be watching for an enemy lurking in the shadows.

The Asgardian wine that followed was soothing, rich, and by the time they had settled in for the night, tucked beneath the heavy blankets, the weight of exhaustion had finally faded.

The Ranger rested her head against his shoulder, her warmth a steady presence, and Loki—trickster, liar, god of mischief—

Did not move.

Did not pull away.

Did not break the moment.

He simply let it be.

Because tonight, there were no battles to fight.

No wars to win.

No gods to defy.

Only this.

Only her.

That was enough.

5.

The End of Everything

Prologue: The Quiet Before the Storm

The air was crisp, carrying the scent of damp earth and ancient stone as the Ranger stepped lightly over the uneven ground. Strange followed beside her, his cloak billowing ever so slightly with each calculated step.

This was supposed to be a simple task.

Nothing extraordinary.

Nothing *universe-shattering*.

Just a retrieval mission—an old text hidden deep within the ruins of a forgotten temple, rumoured to contain insights into lost magic. Something Strange could study, something the Ranger could interpret with her unique perception of the world.

A quiet moment of purpose, free from the weight of war and gods and cosmic forces.

Or so they believed.

But they were not alone.

Something watched.

Something waited.

The First God had not left. It had not retreated into the void.

It had learned.

And she was the key.

But not yet.

Not yet.

"*Are you sure this is the right place?*" The Ranger glanced at Strange as they reached the entrance of the ancient ruin. The worn stone archway loomed over them, its carvings nearly faded by time, but the feeling remained—the air heavy with something *old*.

Strange hummed in thought, his fingers tracing a lingering sigil in the air. It glowed faintly before fading, as if swallowed by the presence of the ruin itself. "*This is it.*"

The Ranger crossed her arms. "*It doesn't feel like much.*"

"*That's what concerns me,*" Strange admitted, stepping forward. "*Magic always leaves a trace. But here—*" He frowned. "*Here, it's like something is waiting to be remembered.*"

The Ranger exhaled, rolling her shoulders. "*Well, isn't that exactly why we're here? To find out what was forgotten?*"

Strange gave her a sidelong glance. "*You have a habit of simplifying things in ways that make me deeply uncomfortable.*"

She smirked. "*It's a talent.*"

He sighed. "*Let's just get this over with.*"

The ruin was still, the kind of quiet that was unnatural. Not peaceful, not abandoned—just watching.

The First God did not move.

It did not need to.

It had seen what it needed to see.

The sorcerer was strong, yes. But strength was irrelevant.

The trickster was dangerous, but even he did not know what he had done.

The Ranger…

She was the anomaly.

A being that should have been insignificant. A mortal. A flicker in time.

And yet—

She had changed something.

The First God had felt the shift. Had tasted the echo of something new.

Not a threat.

Not a challenge.

But a possibility.

It would wait.

It would understand.

And when the time was right…

It would decide.

"*Strange.*"

The Ranger's voice cut through the silence, and the Sorcerer Supreme looked up.

She was staring at something—half-buried beneath the dust, hidden in the fractures of the temple floor.

A sigil.

Faint, ancient, pulsing just beneath the surface.

Strange stepped closer, extending a hand—but the moment his fingers hovered above it—

The sigil reacted.

Not to him.

To her.

A pulse of power rippled outward, the sigil flaring to life as the stone shifted beneath them, energy cracking through the ruin like something stirring awake.

And in the void—

The First God smiled.

It was time.

Something shifted.

A flicker—so brief, so fleeting, that the Ranger barely registered it.

A shadow at the edge of her mind. A presence that was not her own, brushing past her soul like silk.

And then—

Gone.

Her breath hitched. Her fingers twitched. A shiver ran down her spine, but when she turned to look—

Nothing.

The sigil beneath her feet faded, its glow retreating like embers suffocated by the wind. The temple was silent once more, as if it had never woken.

But it had.

Something had changed.

Something had entered her.

And he knew it.

She was his.

At long last, after eons of waiting, of being sealed away, of being forgotten—he was inside her.

Not in the way of possession.

Not in the way of a parasite.

But in the way of something old, something patient, something that had been waiting for the perfect moment.

He had not forced his way in.

He had been welcomed.

Not by choice.

Not by knowledge.

But by fate itself.

And now—

Now he would taste this existence.

Learn what she was.

Learn why the Trickster's magic had changed her.

And when the time was right?

When he had all the knowledge he needed?

He would take back what was his.

This universe.

This existence.

And his revenge.

Far from the ruin, across realms, across time itself—

Loki froze.

A shudder ran through him, deep, cold, wrong.

Not fear.

Not pain.

But something far worse.

An instinctive knowing.

Something had happened.

Something bad.

Something he could not see, could not name, could not grasp—

But he felt it.

Like a scream in the void.

Like a thread being cut and rewoven without his knowledge.

His fingers clenched around the arm of his chair, his breath slow, controlled—but his heart pounded.

He did not know what had changed.

But he knew one thing for certain.

It had to do with her.

And if something had touched what was his—

Then whoever was responsible…

Would suffer for it.

The Ranger shook her head, trying to shake the feeling, the strange aftertaste of whatever had just happened.

Strange was watching her, sharp-eyed, analysing, already suspecting something was off.

But he did not know.

Not yet.

The First God remained silent.

Watching.

Waiting.

Amused.

Because this was only the beginning.

And soon—

They would all understand what it truly meant to awaken him.

Strange's gaze lingered on the Ranger for a moment longer than necessary.

She was still, her eyes distant, as if listening for something neither of them could hear.

Something about that sigil had touched her—he knew it, felt it, but the moment had passed. The glow had faded, the temple's hum of power dissolved into nothing.

The Ranger blinked, then shook her head slightly. "*Well,*" she said, voice measured, "*that was… weird.*"

Strange arched a brow. "*That's putting it lightly.*"

She gave him a small smirk, but there was something off about it. A fraction of a second too slow, an almost imperceptible hesitation.

He noted it.

But then—

It was gone.

The temple was silent once more.

The sigil, nothing but dead stone beneath their feet.

And Strange exhaled, rolling his shoulders.

"*Whatever it was, it's gone now.*"

Gone.

Or so he thought.

They moved forward, stepping past the now-dormant sigil and deeper into the ruin's heart.

The air was cool, the scent of old parchment, dust, and forgotten knowledge lingering in the stillness. Strange raised a hand, conjuring a soft glow to light the way as they reached what appeared to be an altar.

The scrolls rested atop it, untouched, undisturbed for what could have been centuries.

Strange ran his fingers along the stone, his gaze narrowing. "*There's no trap. No curse. Just… a forgotten vault.*"

The Ranger crossed her arms. "*You sound disappointed.*"

Strange smirked slightly. "*Perhaps I was expecting more.*"

"*You always do.*"

His smirk lingered, but he said nothing. Instead, he carefully lifted the first scroll, unraveling it just enough to inspect the markings.

Ancient runes.

A language nearly lost to time.

"*Interesting…*"

The Ranger stepped closer, peering over his shoulder. "*What does it say?*"

Strange tilted his head, reading carefully. "*It's a chronicle of sorts. A record of a lost age. Something about a great… change.*"

His brow furrowed.

Something about the words bothered him.

They were familiar.

Too familiar.

He turned to the second scroll, unraveling it with greater urgency, his eyes scanning the faded ink.

And then—

He froze.

Because there—woven between the lines of forgotten history—

Was a symbol.

A symbol he knew.

The very sigil that had flared to life beneath the Ranger's feet.

The Ranger glanced at him. "*Strange?*"

He didn't answer at first.

His fingers brushed over the symbol, his mind racing.

A sigil with no recorded meaning.

A sigil that should have been dead magic.

A sigil that had responded to her.

A flicker of unease passed through him.

But the scrolls held no power now.

The sigil had lost its spark.

And the temple?

Just a ruin once more.

Strange exhaled slowly, rolling the scroll up and tucking it away. "*Nothing. Just—*" He shook his head. "*—more questions for another time.*"

The Ranger studied him for a moment, then gave a small nod. "*Let's finish what we came for, then.*"

And with that, they gathered the remaining scrolls, placing them carefully into Strange's satchel.

Mission complete.

Nothing to worry about.

Nothing left behind.

Except—

Deep within the Ranger's mind, unseen, unnoticed—

Something smiled.

And waited.

The portal shimmered, golden light bending reality as Strange and the Ranger stepped through, leaving the ruins behind. The moment they crossed the threshold into the Sanctum Sanctorum, the cool stillness of the temple was replaced by the familiar hum of contained magic, the scent of parchment, aged wood, and something unnameable yet distinctly Strange's own.

The mission was over.

The scrolls were secured.

Everything was as it should be.

And yet—

Loki was waiting.

He stood near the grand staircase, arms folded, expression unreadable.

Not lounging, not smirking—waiting.

His emerald gaze swept over them both, slow, deliberate.

He saw nothing out of place.

No wound, no corruption, no lingering traces of foreign magic.

Everything was as it should be.

And yet—

That feeling remained.

The one that had jolted through him across realms, deep and unshakable, as if something had slipped through the cracks of reality and into something he could not see.

Loki did not like what he could not see.

And so, he watched.

And he waited.

But nothing was there.

Not yet.

Strange set his satchel down on a nearby table, rolling his shoulders. "*I assume you didn't drop by just to admire my home, Loki.*"

Loki's lips curled slightly, but the amusement did not reach his eyes. "*What an assumption, dear Sorcerer. I would never waste my time on such trivial things.*"

The Ranger smirked slightly, shaking her head. "*And yet, here you are.*"

Loki's gaze flickered to her.

Paused.

A hesitation so brief, so imperceptible, that no one would have noticed.

No one but himself.

Because there was nothing wrong.

Nothing to see.

Nothing to sense.

And yet, for a fleeting second—

Something inside him whispered:

Look again.

But when he did, there was nothing to find.

The First God was still.

Silent.

The Trickster was clever, yes.

Perceptive.

But he was not all-seeing.

Not yet.

And the First God was patient.

He could wait.

Because time meant nothing to him.

Because this world was already his.

He only needed them to realise it.

And when they did?

It would be far too late.

The Sanctum Sanctorum was quiet.

For once, there were no pressing threats, no ripples in reality to mend, no urgent calls from the Avengers demanding Strange's intervention.

Just the three of them.

A Sorcerer.

A Ranger.

A Trickster.

And the thing that waited.

Unseen.

Unfelt.

Smiling.

Strange poured himself a drink, swirling the dark liquid in his glass before leaning against the grand wooden table. His sharp eyes flicked toward the Ranger. "*So. The sigil.*"

She glanced at him over the rim of her own glass, thoughtful. "*What about it?*"

"*It reacted to you.*"

She exhaled, rolling her shoulders. "*It did.*"

"*But not to me.*"

The words lingered just a second too long.

Loki, perched in his usual spot near the fire, lazily twirling his own goblet of Asgardian wine, did not look at them.

But he was listening.

The Ranger shrugged. "*Maybe it's because I touched it first? Maybe it was just old magic looking for someone to answer?*"

Strange frowned slightly. "*That's not how magic works.*"

"*Isn't it?*"

"*Not when I'm standing right there and it ignores me completely.*"

Loki took a slow sip of his wine, his gaze flickering toward them. "*Are you jealous, Strange?*"

The Sorcerer shot him a glare. "*Jealous? No. Cautious? Always.*"

The Ranger smirked. "*Are you sure? Because it sounds like you're sulking.*"

"*I don't sulk.*"

"*Oh, you sulk,*" Loki mused, a smirk playing at the edge of his lips. "*You sulk magnificently.*"

Strange rolled his eyes, taking another sip of his drink.

The tension eased.

For a moment, it was just conversation, just the comfort of familiarity, the rare moments of companionship they had built despite themselves.

But deep inside—

Something watched.

Something listened.

And something waited.

He didn't trust this feeling.

It was nothing.

It was everything.

The sensation hadn't returned—that ice-cold whisper in his bones, the phantom warning that had jolted through him back in his Sanctuary.

But something felt… off.

Not enough to grasp.

Not enough to act on.

Just enough to be aware of.

Loki's emerald gaze flicked toward the Ranger again, studying her profile in the firelight.

She was the same.

Her presence, her heartbeat, her essence—all exactly as they had always been.

No corruption.

No changes.

Nothing.

And yet—

Something was there.

He could not see it.

Could not touch it.

Could not find it.

And that was what unsettled him the most.

Because if he could not find it, he could not stop it.

His fingers tapped once against the rim of his goblet.

It was nothing.

It was everything.

But there was no proof.

And so he let it go.

For now.

Hidden.

Silent.

Patient.

The First God did not move.

Did not breathe.

Did not stir.

Because it did not need to.

It had already won.

They simply did not know it yet.

And so—

It watched.

It waited.

It smiled.

Because time was nothing to it.

And soon…

They would all understand.

Weeks passed.

Then months.

And life continued.

As if nothing had changed.

As if nothing had awakened.

As if something wasn't waiting.

The First God was patient.

He watched them fight their battles.

He watched them win their victories.

He watched them laugh, breathe, live.

And all the while—

He simply smiled.

Because time was nothing to him.

And soon—

They would all understand.

"*You know, this was supposed to be a quiet mission.*"

The Ranger rolled sideways, barely dodging the flaming sword that nearly cleaved through the stone beneath her.

Loki—all sharp grins and dangerous ease—twisted his dagger through the air, catching the blade of the enemy mid-swing before shoving them back with a pulse of seething green magic.

"*Yes, well,*" he mused, "*you should know by now that quiet is never in the cards when I'm involved.*"

The Ranger huffed, flipping to her feet. "*And yet, I still hope.*"

The battlefield was chaos.

They had been sent to retrieve an artefact before it fell into the hands of a particularly arrogant warlord who thought himself worthy of ancient power.

Standard job.

Nothing unusual.

Nothing cosmic.

Just another day in the office.

Loki vanished in a swirl of magic, reappearing behind the warlord with a smirk that spoke of incoming pain.

The Ranger moved instinctively, ducking between enemies, striking with precision—a well-practiced dance that she and Loki had perfected over time.

And in the end—

They won.

As they always did.

Another mission completed.

Another night returning home victorious.

And the First God watched.

And he waited.

"*No, Wong, I am not taking another student.*"

Strange rubbed his temple, exhaustion creeping in as he closed yet another dimensional rift that had appeared unexpectedly near the coast of Norway.

Wong gave him a pointed look. "*You are the Sorcerer Supreme, you cannot handle everything alone.*"

"*I'm aware,*" Strange muttered, tracing a sigil in the air to reinforce the barrier between realms. "*That's why I'm delegating. To you.*"

Wong sighed. "*Delegating does not mean ignoring.*"

"*Semantics.*"

Another day.

Another rift to mend, another artifact to secure, another fool trying to tear reality apart because they thought they could play god.

Strange was used to it.

This was his life.

His duty.

And nothing felt out of place.

Nothing felt wrong.

And yet—

The First God watched.

Still.

Patient.

Knowing.

Because the more time passed, the more they would all forget to look over their shoulders.

And that?

That was when the game would truly begin.

Loki and the Ranger fought their battles.

Strange protected the Multiverse.

The days bled together.

Everything felt as it always had.

And so, they moved on.

They stopped questioning the moment in the ruins.

They stopped wondering about the sigil.

They stopped searching for something that did not want to be found.

And the First God smiled.

Because time was his greatest ally.

And when the time came?

He would be ready.

And they—

They would never see it coming.

Loki felt warmth.

The kind that was rare for him, the kind he had spent centuries avoiding because it was dangerous.

Because it made him weak.

And yet, here he was—wrapped in it, in her, arms around the woman who had somehow become his entire world without him realising it.

The fire had burned low, casting flickering shadows against the stone walls of his sanctuary. The waterfall outside whispered against the night, a steady rhythm matching her breath.

She was his anchor.

The one constant in the maelstrom of his existence.

He buried his face against her hair, inhaling her scent, feeling the steady thrum of life beneath his fingertips.

She was here.

She was his.

And for once in his long, cursed life—

He was happy.

Then—

She moved.

Her fingers traced along his arm, her breath warm against his skin.

And then, slowly, she lifted her head—

And everything went cold.

Loki froze.

The instant he met her gaze, every fibre of his being screamed in warning.

Because those were not her eyes.

They were wrong.

Too deep.

Too vast.

A void stretching into something endless, ancient, and grinning.

"*Hello, Trickster.*"

The voice was not hers.

It slithered from her lips, but it did not belong to the woman he held.

Loki’s blood ran cold.

His breath hitched, his entire body tensing as the weight of realisation slammed into him like a blade to the chest.

She was gone.

And in her place—

He had returned.

The First God had taken her.

And Loki—God of Lies, of Trickery, of Chaos, of War—

Had never known fear like this.

Across the realms—

In the Sanctum Sanctorum—

Strange's eyes snapped open.

His heart skipped a beat—

Then another—

As if an ice-cold claw had wrapped around his chest and squeezed.

His breath hitched, his fingers clenching against the sheets as a ripple of magic shattered through the very air.

He didn't know what had happened.

But something had.

Something so wrong, so impossible, that it had touched even him.

The air in his chambers was heavy—as if a presence had passed through and left nothing but cold silence in its wake.

Strange sat up, pressing a hand against his chest, his pulse thunderous in his ears.

He was not alone.

Something had changed.

Something had been taken.

And across the realms—

Loki was about to burn the world to the ground to get her back.

Loki stumbled back, his breath shallow, his pulse thundering in his ears.

His magic flared instinctively, crackling at his fingertips, but he did not strike.

Because this was not a battle he could win.

He knew it.

And worse—

The First God knew it, too.

The being that wore her face, that stared at him through eyes that were not hers, did not move.

Did not attack.

Did not need to.

Because he was enjoying this.

Every moment.

Every second that Loki's world crumbled into dust.

Every flicker of raw, soul-shattering agony that twisted through his body as the truth settled deep into his bones.

The Ranger was gone.

And he felt it.

Not just the loss—

But the absence.

Like something had reached into his very being and ripped her away.

Not stolen.

Not held captive.

Erased.

As if she had never been.

And Loki—the Trickster, the liar, the God who always had a way out—

Had no way to bring her back.

He knew it.

The First God knew it.

And the way he smiled through her lips was a knife driven deep into Loki's chest.

The First God tilted her head, slow, patient.

Enjoying this.

Enjoying Loki breaking.

"*Ah,*" he murmured, her voice curling through the silence like silk, "*so you finally understand.*"

Loki's hands shook.

The fire in the hearth burned low, casting shadows that twisted unnaturally against the walls of his sanctuary.

His sanctuary.

Their sanctuary.

And she was gone.

He barely registered the way his knees hit the stone floor, the way his breath hitched, the way his entire world collapsed in on itself.

There was nothing left to fight.

Because this was beyond him.

He was not enough.

And the First God knew it.

"*Do you feel it, Trickster?*" The being in her body stepped forward, amusement flickering through that mockery of her voice. "*The emptiness? The helplessness?*"

Loki said nothing.

Because he couldn’t.

There were no words for this.

Only pain.

Only defeat.

Only loss.

"*I could break you further,*" the First God continued, thoughtful. "*But why?*"

A slow smile.

"*You are already broken.*"

Across the realms—

On Earth—

Strange’s heart raced.

Something was wrong.

Very wrong.

His hands trembled as he reached for the nearest artefact, searching for what had woken him, for the sensation that still clung to him like ice.

It was fear.

Not his own.

But Loki's.

And that?

That was not possible.

Because Loki did not fear.

Not like this.

Not enough to shake the very fabric of reality.

Strange exhaled sharply, his hands tracing the air, a portal forming instinctively—before he even knew where he was stepping into.

And then—

He was there.

The moment he crossed the threshold, the moment his boots touched the stone floor of Loki's sanctuary—

He felt it.

The sheer wrongness.

Like the air itself had been poisoned by something that should not exist.

And then—

He saw him.

Loki was on his knees.

His head hung low, his hands limp at his sides, his entire body shaking as if he had been shattered from the inside out.

This was not the Loki he knew.

This was not the God who smirked in the face of destruction, who twisted every loss into an advantage.

This was a man who had lost everything.

And Strange felt the weight of it instantly.

The hair on the back of his neck rose, his breath hitching as he turned—

And then he saw her.

No.

Not her.

The First God.

And Strange shivered.

Because for the first time in his existence, the Sorcerer Supreme felt something that no amount of training, no battle with Dormammu, no war against cosmic forces could have ever prepared him for.

He felt dread.

Because he recognised what had happened.

He had seen possession before.

Had seen the influence of dark magic, the touch of cosmic horrors.

But this was not possession.

This was occupation.

And the being that stared at him through Tanja's eyes?

It was smiling.

Because this was not a battle.

Not yet.

This was a warning.

And Loki had already lost.

Loki was on his knees.

The weight of defeat settled deep into his bones, an unbearable weight pressing against him, crushing him beneath the sheer wrongness of it all.

For the first time in his immortal existence—

He knew he had lost.

There was no trick.

No illusion.

No clever escape waiting just beyond reach.

He had failed.

And now, she was gone.

But then—

Something shifted.

A flicker. A whisper.

A warmth like firelight in the cold abyss of despair.

A voice that was not his own, yet one he knew.

"*I am here.*"

The words curled through his mind like embers in the dark.

"*You can still save her.*"

Loki’s breath hitched.

His fingers twitched.

Because he knew that voice.

He had heard it before.

Ancient.

Pure.

The magic.

The power that had chosen him.

The power that had awakened once before.

The power that was his to command.

Loki's heart pounded as he reached inward, stretching toward that flickering warmth, that glimmer of hope in the abyss.

And the magic answered.

"*Use me.*"

The words were soft, but absolute.

"*I am at your command.*"

Loki exhaled sharply, his fingers tightening into fists.

He could do this.

He could bring her back.

He could undo what had been done.

But then—

"*To use my full power,*" the voice whispered, "*you must give up your greatest treasure.*"

Loki froze.

A slow, sickening dread coiled in his chest.

He already knew what it meant.

What the price was.

And it was too much.

Loki shook his head, his breathing uneven. "*No.*"

The magic was patient.

"*That is the cost.*"

His pulse thundered in his ears.

His throat tightened.

"*There must be another way—*"

"*There is not.*"

The voice was not cruel.

It was not unkind.

It was simply truth.

To save her, he must lose her.

Not just her presence.

Not just her touch, her voice, her laughter.

But everything.

Every battle fought side by side.

Every trial endured together.

Every moment shared, every whisper of love, every aching glance, every quiet breath stolen between wars and chaos and the endless tide of fate—

Gone.

Erased.

She would live.

But in his world—she would have never existed.

Loki’s chest ached.

This was too much.

Too cruel.

How could he choose this?

But then—

He looked up.

And he saw her face—no, his face.

The First God, mocking him, wearing her form like a sick twisted joke, feeding on the very pain that was consuming him.

And he knew.

This wasn’t a fair fight.

It never had been.

And Loki had never been one to play fair.

His fists unclenched.

His magic stilled.

His breathing steadied.

"*Fine.*"

The world shuddered.

Strange, still standing at the edge of the room, felt it instantly—a shift so profound, so fundamental, that the very balance of the universe tilted.

Like something had just rewritten itself.

Like something ancient had just been unraveled.

Loki stood.

And as he did—

The world around him changed.

The fire flared, the air trembled, the shadows shrank away.

And Strange—Sorcerer Supreme, Master of the Mystic Arts, Keeper of the Multiverse—

Felt power like nothing he had ever witnessed before.

Loki was changing.

No—

The world was changing around him.

And in that moment—

Everything was undone.

Strange staggered back, his breath catching in his throat.

Not from fear.

Not from the sheer wrongness of what was unfolding before him.

But from power.

A power so immense, so absolute, that it pressed against the very fabric of reality—a force so raw and unrestrained that Strange, Sorcerer Supreme, Master of the Mystic Arts, felt himself shrink before it.

And the First God felt it too.

For the first time—

It knew fear.

It had spent eons watching.

It had waited.

It had studied.

And yet—

It had never accounted for this.

For *him.*

For Loki.

Not like this.

Not unbound.

Not limitless.

Not a god—but something else entirely.

Something that should not be.

And as the First God stared into the unrelenting storm that surged within Loki—

For the first time since its birth—

It knew what it was to be prey.

Loki did not move at first.

He stood there, calm, silent, watching.

The power surged through him, bending the very air around him, making the room tremble as if the universe itself was reacting to his presence.

Strange couldn't breathe.

The First God couldn't comprehend.

And then—

Loki moved.

So fast— so seamlessly— that Strange barely registered it.

He stepped forward—no, through.

Through the Ranger.

Through the First God that had made her its vessel.

And with a single, impossibly swift movement—

He ripped it out of her.

A soundless scream—

A void shattering—

A presence that had existed before time itself—

Torn from existence.

Loki didn't just banish it.

Didn't just seal it away.

He erased it.

Utterly.

Completely.

As if it had never been.

And that—

That was impossible.

The Ranger slumped to the ground, her body weak, trembling, hollow.

She had seen everything.

She had felt everything.

The moment Loki's power had touched the First God, she had been there, caught in the vast storm of his will—

And she had watched.

Watched as he had ended it.

Not with rage.

Not with cruelty.

But with finality.

For her.

And then—

Then he had turned to look at her.

She lifted her gaze, desperate, aching, needing to see the man she loved, the man who had just torn apart the fabric of the cosmos to bring her back.

But when he looked down at her—

There was nothing.

No warmth.

No recognition.

No flicker of relief, of joy, of love.

Just a god looking at a stranger.

The Ranger’s heart shattered.

Because she knew.

Oh, gods, she knew.

Strange watched, unable to speak, unable to process what he had just witnessed.

Loki had done the impossible.

Had erased something that should not have been erasable.

Had rewritten reality itself in a way that even Strange, with all his knowledge, could not comprehend.

And then—

He had turned to him.

Loki met Strange's eyes, his expression steady, as if none of this had mattered to him.

As if this had been just another task.

Another battle.

He nodded once.

A simple gesture.

Then, without a word—

He vanished.

The Ranger sat frozen, her breath ragged, her hands trembling.

She barely heard Strange moving toward her, barely felt the warmth of his presence as he knelt beside her.

Her world was collapsing.

Not because she had been taken.

Not because she had almost been lost.

But because Loki—

Her Loki—

No longer knew her.

Every battle.

Every quiet moment.

Every whispered word, every promise, every time she had reached for him and he had been there.

Gone.

She was nothing to him now.

And she—

She remembered everything.

The portal shimmered, folding reality in on itself as Strange and the Ranger stepped through, leaving Loki's sanctuary behind.

The moment they crossed the threshold, the air of the Sanctum Sanctorum felt different.

Not safer.

Not warmer.

Just… empty.

As if something had been taken from the world, leaving only a hollow echo in its wake.

Strange barely heard the portal seal shut behind them.

His mind was too full.

Too many questions.

Too many impossibilities.

Too many pieces of reality that did not add up.

But none of that mattered now.

Because she was breaking.

The Ranger stood motionless, her back to him, her breathing uneven.

She had not spoken.

Had not moved since Loki had vanished.

Strange exhaled slowly, removing his cloak, draping it over a chair before stepping forward.

"*You should sit down.*"

Nothing.

"*You should rest.*"

Still nothing.

Strange hesitated, watching the way her hands trembled at her sides, how her shoulders shook, how the weight of everything pressed down on her like a collapsing star.

He had seen grief before.

Had seen people lose those they loved.

But this?

This was different.

This was worse.

Because he had seen Loki look at her.

And he had seen what wasn't there.

The very foundation of her world had shattered—

And she was the only one left to remember it.

Strange moved carefully, placing a steady hand on her shoulder.

"*Ranger…*"

The moment he spoke—

She broke.

A sharp inward breath, a tremble that turned into a shudder, and then—

She collapsed.

Not from injury.

Not from exhaustion.

But from the sheer weight of loss.

Strange caught her, lowering them both to the floor as her body shook with silent sobs.

He didn’t speak.

Didn’t offer false comforts.

Didn’t tell her it would be okay.

Because it wouldn’t.

Not now.

Maybe not ever.

So he did the only thing he could.

He stayed.

A steady presence.

A reminder that she was not alone.

Even as she grieved for a man who had forgotten her.

Minutes passed.

Then longer.

The Ranger’s sobs faded, turning into ragged breaths, turning into silence.

Strange didn’t move.

Didn’t let go.

Because he knew—

This was not something to fix.

This was something to survive.

And when she finally spoke—

Her voice was so small, so quiet, that he almost missed it.

"*He's gone…*"

Strange closed his eyes briefly, then opened them.

"*He's alive,*" he corrected, his voice gentle. "*But yes… he's gone.*"

She shuddered, nodding once, but said nothing more.

Because what else was there to say?

Strange carefully helped her to her feet, guiding her toward one of the Sanctum's quiet rooms—a space untouched by magic, untouched by anything except peace.

"*You need to rest,*" he murmured. "*Sleep if you can. I'll be close.*"

She didn't argue.

Didn't resist.

Just nodded once, stepping into the room, closing the door behind her.

Strange let out a slow, controlled breath.

His fingers curled at his sides.

And for the first time in a long, long time—

He felt helpless.

Because he could mend wounds.

He could stabilise reality.

He could fight gods and monsters alike.

But he could not fix this.

He could only be here.

And hope that somehow, some way—

They would both find a way to live with the weight of what had been lost.

Loki stood amidst the ruins of a battlefield, the stench of burnt earth and spent magic lingering in the air.

The bodies of those who had challenged him lay scattered, the echoes of their defeat fading into the wind.

Another battle.

Another meaningless fight.

One he would barely remember.

One that did not matter.

And yet—

Something felt different.

He could not name it.

Could not grasp it.

It was not pain.

Not loss.

Not anything he had ever felt before.

But it was there.

A hole.

An emptiness.

A space within him that should not have been empty.

And no matter how he tried to ignore it—

It would not go away.

Loki exhaled sharply, running a hand through his dark, sweat-dampened hair as he surveyed the remnants of the skirmish.

His warriors cheered somewhere in the distance.

A victory.

Another pointless victory.

He should have felt triumphant.

Should have smirked, should have relished the moment.

But all he felt was cold.

As if something had been taken from him.

As if something vital had been erased.

He did not know what it was.

Only that it should have been there.

But it was not.

The feeling did not leave him.

Not when he returned to Asgard.

Not when he sat upon the golden throne, surrounded by power, by admiration, by everything he had ever desired.

Not when he walked through the halls of his palace, through chambers filled with relics, with knowledge, with the secrets of gods and men alike.

He had everything.

So why did it feel like he had nothing?

Why was there a piece missing?

Why—

Why did he feel like something had once been there, something important—

And now, it was simply gone?

Loki stood at the balcony of his chambers, overlooking the vast expanse of the cosmos, his fingers lightly tapping against the railing.

His mind would not be still.

No matter how he tried to push the feeling aside, no matter how he buried himself in distractions, the emptiness remained.

A dull, gnawing ache.

A whisper of something lost.

And he did not know why.

He did not know what.

He only knew—

That he could not fill it.

And he did not know if he ever would.

The dream shattered.

The golden throne. The halls of Asgard. The admiration, the reverence—

Gone.

Loki opened his eyes, exhaling sharply as the illusion faded into the cold emptiness of reality.

The throne had never been his.

It had only been a distraction.

A weak attempt to fill the void.

But the hole inside him remained.

And Loki—a god who had once thrived in chaos, who had carved his name into the bones of history—

Could not live with that emptiness.

So he did what he did best.

He hunted.

Loki tore through the Nine Realms like a wildfire, leaving nothing but ashes and whispers in his wake.

Every enemy that had ever challenged him—

Every being that had ever dared to stand in his way—

They all fell before him.

None of them stood a chance.

Because Loki was unhinged.

Because Loki was relentless.

Because no one could stop a god who had nothing to lose.

And the Nine Realms trembled.

Because wherever Loki appeared—

It was the end.

And yet—

He felt nothing.

No matter how many he destroyed.

No matter how many battles he won.

No matter how many monsters, tyrants, and warlords he erased from existence.

The emptiness remained.

That one space inside him—

Still aching.

Still waiting.

Still missing… something.

Something he could not remember.

The realms spoke of him in fear.

The Trickster was gone.

The God of Chaos had become something else.

Something unrelenting.

Something merciless.

A force that did not barter, manipulate, or scheme.

A force that simply erased.

Because Loki did not care anymore.

Because Loki was searching.

For what, he did not know.

Only that he had to find it.

And until he did—

The Nine Realms would suffer.

The air was still.

The distant hum of the city barely reached this far—this quiet, hidden corner of the world where no one would think to look.

Strange had chosen the safe house well.

It was far away from everything.

From the chaos.

From the gods.

From the wreckage of what had been lost.

And as the portal flickered shut behind them, Clint Barton leaned against the worn wooden table, arms crossed, watching them both carefully.

Watching her.

The Ranger stood motionless, silent, as if the world no longer felt real to her.

As if she was afraid to breathe, afraid to move, afraid that if she did—

She would shatter completely.

And for the first time since Strange had stepped through that portal—Clint truly understood.

Clint let out a slow, sharp breath, running a hand through his hair as he stared at Strange. "*So let me get this straight—*" he said, his voice edged with disbelief. " Loki wiped out a god— actually, no, he erased it—*and then just... what? Forgot about her?*"

Strange folded his arms. "*Not just forgot. The magic took everything. Every memory, every connection. To him, she never existed.*"

Clint's stomach dropped.

He looked at the Ranger again—her distant stare, the way her hands trembled ever so slightly, the way she seemed lost in a world only she could see.

Clint had seen broken people before.

He had seen grief.

He had lived it.

But this?

This was something else.

This was a woman who had lost everything—but the cruelest part?

She was the only one who remembered it.

And that kind of pain?

That kind of isolation?

It would destroy her if no one pulled her back.

Clint sighed, rubbing the back of his neck before stepping forward.

He kept his movements slow, careful, treating her like a wounded animal that might bolt at any moment.

"*Hey, Ranger,*" he said softly. "*You hungry?*"

She didn't answer.

Didn't acknowledge him.

Strange exhaled, shaking his head. "*She hasn't said much since it happened.*"

Clint watched her for a long moment.

Then—

He pulled out a chair, sat down, and leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table.

"*Well, guess what?*" His voice was steady, grounded. "*You don't have to talk. But you do have to eat. So I'm gonna make some coffee, maybe find some actual food in this place, and then you and I? We're gonna sit, and we're gonna deal with this. Got it?*"

The Ranger's shoulders tensed—just barely.

A flicker of recognition in her distant eyes.

Clint didn't press.

Didn't push.

He just nodded, standing, moving toward the kitchen with purpose, as if this was just another normal day.

Because sometimes—

That was what people like them needed the most.

Something normal to hold on to.

Something that wasn't loss, wasn't magic, wasn't gods and impossible choices and broken fates.

Just something real.

And he would be damned if he let her fall apart on his watch.

Strange watched the exchange carefully.

Watched the way Clint spoke without forcing her to respond.

Watched the way the Ranger's shoulders shifted—just slightly—as if the weight pressing down on her had lifted a fraction.

Strange knew loss.

But Clint knew how to handle it.

And that was why he had brought her here.

He sighed, rolling his shoulders, then met Clint's gaze. "*She's safe with you?*"

Clint nodded. "*Yeah. I got her.*"

Strange exhaled through his nose, looking back at the Ranger one last time.

She didn't look at him.

Didn’t move.

But he had the feeling she knew he was leaving.

Knew that this was her fight now.

With a slow, steady breath, Strange raised a hand, summoning a portal.

"*I’ll check in,*" he promised, his voice quieter now. "*If anything—*"

"*Go,*" Clint said. "*I’ll take care of her.*"

Strange hesitated—just for a second.

Then, without another word—

He stepped through the portal and was gone.

The silence stretched between them.

Clint moved through the kitchen, the sound of clanking dishes and the gurgling coffee maker the only things grounding them to reality.

Then—

A whisper.

A breath of a voice, barely there.

"*Why?*"

Clint froze.

Slowly, he turned.

The Ranger was looking at him now.

Not with clarity.

Not with understanding.

But with pain.

With a raw, open wound in her soul.

Her voice cracked when she spoke again.

"*Why did he forget me?*"

Clint set the mug he had been holding down carefully.

He met her shattered gaze.

And he told her the only truth he could.

"*Because he loved you too much to let you go any other way.*"

The Ranger's breath hitched.

Her fingers curled into fists.

She said nothing.

And Clint—

Clint just waited.

Because she wasn't alone in this.

Not anymore.

Clint Barton had never needed magic to work miracles.

He wasn't a god, a sorcerer, or a chosen one.

He was just a man.

A man with a bow, a sharp aim, and the ability to see what others refused to.

And right now?

He saw her.

The Ranger.

Not the woman who had fought beside gods.

Not the warrior who had faced trials that would break lesser beings.

Not the person the universe seemed to keep testing over and over again.

Just her.

And she was drowning.

But Clint had seen people drown before.

And he had learned how to pull them back up.

Bit by bit.

Day by day.

Until they remembered how to breathe again.

Step One: Coffee and Silence

He didn’t push.

Didn’t force words.

Didn’t ask her how she felt or tell her to move on or try to fix something that couldn’t be fixed.

He just sat across from her, sipping his coffee, reading the news, and letting her exist.

Letting her get used to the quiet.

Letting her realize that she was still here.

That she still had a choice.

That life had not ended, even if it felt like it had.

She didn’t say much.

Didn’t touch the coffee at first.

Didn’t react when he casually threw a knife into the table, embedding it an inch from her hand, just to see if she’d flinch.

(She didn’t.)

But she noticed.

And that?

That was enough for now.

Step Two: Routine

Clint's way of helping wasn't about grand gestures.

It was about the little things.

The small, unremarkable pieces of life that no one thought mattered—until they were gone.

So he set a rhythm.

Nothing demanding.

Nothing that felt like a burden.

Just normalcy.

Coffee at sunrise.

A walk outside, whether she wanted to or not.

Weapons maintenance—because keeping your hands busy keeps your mind steady.

And then—

The part he knew would take the longest.

Talking.

Step Three: A Well-Placed Joke

Clint leaned against the porch railing, stretching his arms above his head.

"*So, listen,*" he said casually, "*I'm thinking of starting a support group.*"

The Ranger shot him a tired, unimpressed glance. "*A what?*"

"*You know, for people who got their minds messed with by Loki.*"

A long pause.

Clint smirked, sipping his beer. "*I'm thinking of calling it 'He's Hot But Also The Worst.'*"

The Ranger blinked.

Then—

Something almost like a breath of amusement escaped her.

It wasn't a laugh.

It wasn't even a smile.

But it was something.

And Clint?

He took that as a win.

Step Four: Sparring (And Maybe a Little Violence)

"*Alright, that's it,*" Clint said one morning, tossing a set of knives onto the table. "*We're sparring.*"

The Ranger arched a brow. "*Are we?*"

"*Yep.*"

"*Why?*"

"*Because I need to hit something, and so do you.*"

He saw the resistance in her eyes.

The way she wanted to argue.

To say she wasn't ready.

To say it wouldn't change anything.

So Clint did what Clint did best.

He pushed just enough.

"*Unless you're afraid I'll win,*" he said, smirking.

That did it.

The next moment, a knife was flying toward his face.

He dodged, laughing. "*There she is.*"

The Ranger rolled her eyes. "*You are insufferable.*"

"*And yet, here we are.*"

And as they fell into combat rhythm—as the movements became instinct again—Clint saw it.

For the first time since Strange had brought her here.

A spark.

Small.

Faint.

But there.

Because this wasn't about Loki.

This was about her.

And Clint Barton would make damn sure she didn't forget who she was.

Not now.

Not ever.

The night was quiet.

Not the suffocating kind of silence she had grown used to—the hollow, aching absence of something that should have been there but wasn't.

This was different.

This was peaceful.

The safe house was dimly lit, a single candle flickering on the worn wooden table between them. Clint sat back in

his chair, feet propped up on another, spinning a knife between his fingers.

The Ranger sat across from him, hands wrapped around a cup of coffee she had barely touched.

Clint was waiting.

He was always waiting.

Because he knew this moment would come eventually.

And tonight?

Tonight was the night.

Her voice was quiet at first.

Soft.

So much so that Clint almost missed it.

"*I remember the moment it happened.*"

He stopped spinning the knife.

Didn’t speak.

Didn’t move.

Just listened.

She stared into the fire, her fingers tightening around the cup, her breath steady but strained.

"*I saw it,*" she continued. "*I saw what he did. What he chose.*"

Clint leaned forward slightly. "*Tell me.*"

She took a slow breath.

And then—

She did.

Her words were measured.

Not rushed.

Not emotional.

Just raw truth.

She told him about Loki standing before the First God, knowing he had no way to win.

Told him about the way he had searched for another way, how he had tried to bargain with reality itself.

How the ancient magic—the magic that had chosen him—offered him a way.

But at a terrible price.

"*To use my full power, you must give up your greatest treasure.*"

Loki had hesitated.

He had fought against it.

But in the end—

He had surrendered.

Because it was never a choice at all.

Because she meant more to him than his own memories, his own happiness, his own future.

"*He gave me my life back,*" she whispered. "*And in doing so… he gave up everything.*"

Her voice hitched.

And for the first time in months—

Her eyes burned with tears she had been too numb to shed.

Clint exhaled slowly, setting his knife down.

"*That's a hell of a thing to carry,*" he murmured.

She nodded.

"*I didn't understand it at first.*"

Her hands trembled slightly.

"*I was so caught in the pain of it… of losing him, of watching him look at me like I was nothing—*"

Her breath shuddered, but she forced herself to continue.

"*But now… I see it.*"

She lifted her gaze to Clint's, her expression stronger now—not healed, not whole, but anchored.

"*He didn't just save my life.*"

A slow inhale.

A steady exhale.

"*He gave it back to me.*"

Clint watched her carefully. "*And what are you gonna do with it?*"

The Ranger's fingers tightened around the cup.

Her heart was still broken.

The pain was still there.

But now?

Now there was something else, too.

A purpose.

"*I'm going to live,*" she said, voice steady. "*For him.*"

Clint held her gaze for a long moment.

Then—

He nodded.

Slowly.

Approvingly.

"*Good,*" he said simply. "*Because wasting a gift like that? Would've been a damn shame.*"

The Ranger huffed a soft, almost breathless laugh—the first in so long.

Clint smirked slightly, tilting his head. "*Did you just laugh?*"

"*Shut up.*"

"*You did. It was small, but it was there. Damn, I'm good at this.*"

She shook her head, rolling her eyes—

But she didn't deny it.

And Clint?

He considered this night a victory.

Because for the first time in a long time—

She wasn't just existing.

She was living.

Even if she didn't know where the road would lead next.

The Thunderer's Dilemma

Thor stood at the edge of the Bifrost, his grip tight around Mjølnir, watching the cosmos tremble.

He could feel it.

Every storm that crackled in the sky.

Every whisper of fear across the Nine Realms.

Every being that had once challenged Loki, now nothing more than dust in his wake.

Loki was unstoppable.

Unhinged.

And for the first time in Thor's long life—

He did not know if he could save him.

Because this was not just Loki's rage.

Not just another scheme, another game, another tangled web of lies and chaos.

This was something else.

Something fundamentally different.

And if Thor stood in his way—

It would mean his end.

Or Loki's.

And he was not sure if he could do what needed to be done.

So—

He turned to the only man who might have answers.

The only one who might understand.

The Sanctum Sanctorum was quiet when Thor stepped through the portal.

Strange barely looked up as the God of Thunder strode into the room, the tension radiating off him like a gathering storm.

"*You heard,*" Strange said flatly.

Thor's jaw tensed. "*The whole universe has heard.*"

Strange finally looked up. "*Then you know what I'm going to say.*"

Thor narrowed his gaze. "*Tell me anyway.*"

The Sorcerer sighed, leaning back, fingers steepled.

"*This didn't start with a war. Or a throne. Or some twisted ambition.*"

His gaze darkened.

"*This started with a single choice.*"

Thor listened.

He listened as Strange told him everything.

The sigil.

The First God.

How Loki fought something that should not have been fought.

How Loki won—but at an unspeakable price.

How he had given up his greatest power.

How he had erased her from his life to save her.

And how, in doing so, he had lost the one thing that had kept him tethered to himself.

Thor's blood ran cold.

Because he understood.

Oh, gods, he understood.

Loki was not just angry.

Not just lost.

Loki was searching.

For something he could never find.

For something that had been torn from him.

For something that his heart still ached for, even if his mind no longer knew why.

And that kind of emptiness—

That kind of loss—

Could not be filled.

No matter how many foes he destroyed.

No matter how much havoc he unleashed upon the realms.

Because Loki was trying to fight a war inside himself that he could never win.

And the worst part?

He didn’t even know what he had lost.

Thor exhaled slowly, bracing his hands on the table, his head bowing.

"*So what do we do?*"

Strange did not answer immediately.

Because the truth was—

He did not know.

This was not something that could be reversed.

Not something that could be fixed with magic or time or words.

Loki was not cursed.

He was not possessed.

This was Loki as he was now.

And the only way to bring him back—

Was for him to remember what he had given up.

And that?

That was something beyond even Strange's power.

So he met Thor's gaze, his voice quieter than before.

"*The question isn't what we do, Thor.*"

A pause.

A flicker of something almost like regret in the Sorcerer's expression.

"*The question is… what happens when she finds him first?*"

Thor's heart skipped a beat.

Because that—

That was something they were not ready for.

Thor could not wait any longer.

His brother was unleashed upon the realms, tearing through anything and anyone that stood in his way, leaving nothing but fear and destruction in his wake.

Loki had been many things in his long life—

A trickster.

A schemer.

A liar.

A warrior.

A king, if only briefly.

But this?

This was not the brother he knew.

This was something else.

Something dangerous.

Something unstoppable.

Something even Thor could not name.

But he had to try.

Because if he did not—

If no one stopped Loki—

Then soon, there would be nothing left to save.

The air cracked with lightning as Thor descended onto the battlefield—

A ruined city, its streets burned and broken, the last remnants of another victory Loki would not remember.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

And there—

Amidst the wreckage, amidst the shattered world he had left behind—

Loki stood.

He was calm.

Too calm.

His armour was unscathed, his expression unreadable, his gaze sharp and unfeeling.

He did not look like a man who had just walked through war.

He looked like a god who had barely noticed it.

And as Thor landed before him, gripping Mjølnir tightly in his fist, his heart clenched.

Because for the first time—

Thor was not sure if he was standing before his brother.

Or if he was standing before something else entirely.

Loki lifted his gaze—

And for a fraction of a second, time itself seemed to hold its breath.

The brothers faced each other—

Not as they once had, when they were children, racing through Asgard's golden halls.

Not as they had in war, blade against hammer, fury against righteousness.

Not as they had in past betrayals, in past forgivenesses, in past broken moments that neither of them could truly let go of.

This was something new.

Something inevitable.

Something final.

Far away, in the Sanctum Sanctorum—

Strange searched for answers, pouring over forgotten texts, reaching into the depths of magic itself—

But the answers he sought refused to be found.

Far away, in a quiet safe house—

The Ranger laughed.

A small, genuine sound, startled out of her by something Clint had just said.

It was the first time in a long time that laughter felt natural.

Felt real.

Felt like something that belonged to her.

And then—

Then the world stopped.

The cosmos held its breath.

Because this was the moment before everything changed.

The moment before fate unraveled.

The moment when everything that had been set in motion would finally collide.

And when time began to move again—

Nothing would ever be the same.

The world was still.

Silent.

Hanging in perfect balance, on the razor's edge of something inevitable.

Thor and Loki stood face to face, neither moving, neither speaking.

No words were needed.

Because this was always going to happen.

Because this had to happen.

Because they had both known all along—

That the path Loki had taken…

Could only lead here.

Thor's grip on Mjølnir tightened.

Loki's fingers curled at his sides, his magic whispering beneath his skin.

Their eyes locked—

And for a fleeting moment, there was understanding.

Not forgiveness.

Not mercy.

Not even love.

Just understanding.

Because this was fate.

And neither of them could stop it.

In the Sanctum Sanctorum, Strange slammed a book shut, his breath sharp, his mind racing.

"*Damn it!*" he hissed, pacing the floor.

Everything had led to this moment.

Everything had been set in motion long before any of them knew.

And now—

Now it was happening.

Loki and Thor were standing on the precipice of something irreversible.

And if someone didn't act—

Everything would fall apart.

Clint and the Ranger sat at the small wooden table, coffee cooling, the warmth of laughter still lingering between them.

The moment had been light.

Normal.

Then—

They both stopped.

Mid-conversation.

Mid-motion.

Mid-breath.

Because something had shifted.

The atmosphere changed.

The air felt too thick.

Too heavy.

Like the universe itself had tensed.

And then—

A portal ripped open before them.

Strange stepped through, his expression dark, unyielding, absolute.

"*We must go! Now!*"

There was no hesitation.

Clint was on his feet instantly, hand already reaching for his bow.

The Ranger didn’t ask.

Didn’t question.

Didn’t waste a single second.

She simply moved.

Through the portal.

Through to whatever awaited them.

Because deep inside her—

She already knew where this was leading.

And she was ready.

For a moment—

A single, impossible moment—

The universe stood still.

Then—

Loki screamed.

And the universe shattered.

Thor had faced many things in his lifetime.

He had faced monsters.

He had faced gods.

He had faced death itself.

But nothing—

Nothing had ever felt like this.

Because this was not just power.

This was not just magic.

This was loss.

This was rage.

This was grief so deep, so endless, so absolute, that it crushed him before he even knew what was happening.

The sky split apart.

The earth cracked beneath him.

And Thor fell.

Not because Loki had struck him down.

Not because he had been wounded.

But because he couldn’t stand.

The sheer weight of Loki's soul pressed upon him—

Raw.

Unrelenting.

Devastating.

Thor's hands trembled against the ground.

His breath hitched in his throat.

He had never felt anything like this.

And for the first time in his long life—

Thor was helpless.

Not against a weapon.

Not against an army.

But against Loki's pain.

Because how?

How could Loki still stand?

How could he carry this weight—this soul-crushing, all-consuming void inside him—

And not break beneath it?

Loki’s power erupted outward—

Unleashed.

Untethered.

Unstoppable.

His voice ripped through existence, a sound that was not just sound, but something far deeper.

Something that made realms tremble.

Something that threatened to tear reality apart.

Because this was not just rage.

Not just grief.

This was the scream of emptiness itself.

And the cosmos felt it.

And the cosmos feared it.

A portal tore open.

Bright, golden light cut through the storm as Strange stepped through—

Followed by Clint.

Followed by her.

The Ranger.

She barely had time to take in the ruined landscape.

Barely had time to register Thor—

Kneeling.

Struggling to breathe.

Pressed into the earth beneath a power that no god should have to endure.

Because all she saw—

Was him.

Loki.

And he was nothing like the man she had known.

Not anymore.

Because the emptiness within him had finally found its voice.

And it was devouring the world.

The world was already breaking.

Loki did not care.

The sky burned. The air was too heavy, too thick with magic, too charged with the power of something that had gone far beyond gods and mortals.

Thor was still kneeling, crushed beneath the sheer weight of Loki’s fury, Loki’s emptiness, Loki’s grief.

His fingers twitched, crackling energy twisting through the air—

Power ready to end this.

One final act.

One final, irreversible decision.

The power of a god who had nothing left to lose.

And then—

Something happened.

Something impossible.

Loki's body froze.

The magic at his fingertips coiled in the air, twisting, pulsing, waiting to be unleashed.

And yet—

It did not move.

He did not move.

Because in that moment—

Two eyes met his.

And everything stopped.

Loki stared.

The rage inside him, the fire, the unrelenting storm that had carried him this far—

Vanished.

Like it had never been there.

The magic in his hands flickered—

Then dissolved into nothing.

His breath caught.

His pulse stuttered.

And for the first time since this nightmare began—

Loki faltered.

She was there.

Unwavering.

Steady.

Unafraid.

Grounded.

A figure standing in the midst of ruin, in the centre of a storm that should have consumed her.

But she did not waver.

She did not bow.

She simply stood.

And looked at him.

Like she knew him.

Like she had always known him.

Like she was waiting.

Loki's mind whirled, grasping at something he could not name.

Who was she?

And why—

Why did she feel like something he had lost?

Something he should remember?

Something he should know?

Time stood still.

And for the first time since Loki had walked into the void —

For the first time since he had torn apart the First God, since he had given up the greatest sacrifice of all—

Loki did not know what to do.

The storm was over.

The power that had threatened to consume the cosmos had vanished into silence.

And in that silence—

She spoke.

One word.

His name.

"*Loki.*"

A sound so simple.

So small.

And yet—

It shattered him.

Loki staggered back, his breath catching in his throat as if he had been struck by a force he could not see.

His body trembled.

His hands shook.

He did not understand—

Why did it hurt?

Why did his name—his own name—carry such weight in her voice?

Why did it feel like something was breaking inside him?

Why did it feel like he was being unraveled?

She stepped forward.

Her eyes never left his.

Deep.

Knowing.

Understanding.

And Loki could not move.

Because those eyes—

They knew him.

And something inside him—

Something that had been buried, erased, torn away—

Knew her.

His knees hit the ground.

Loki was not a man who knelt.

He had knelt before kings.

Before death.

Before gods older than time itself.

But this—

This was different.

He was falling.

Not to surrender.

Not to beg.

But because his body could no longer hold the weight of the truth.

The emptiness that had hollowed him out, the void that had driven him to tear apart the realms—

It was gone.

And in its place—

There was her.

She knelt in front of him.

Slow.

Deliberate.

No fear.

No hesitation.

And then—

She wrapped her arms around him.

A simple embrace.

A gesture so soft, so familiar, so devastatingly real—

That Loki broke.

His hands clutched at her, as if anchoring himself to something that had slipped away from him long ago.

His breath shook, his entire being trembled.

And then—

Then she whispered his name again.

"*Loki.*"

And the universe shifted.

And his mind—

Changed.

It hit him all at once.

Like a dam breaking, a tidal wave crashing down, an entire lifetime being poured back into the hollowed-out space inside him.

He remembered everything.

Every battle.

Every trial.

Every moment they had stood side by side.

Every time she had looked at him with trust in her eyes.

Every time she had smiled at him, laughed with him, fought for him.

Every quiet night by the fire, every whispered truth, every moment he had spent falling deeper and deeper into something he had never dared to name.

He remembered her.

Tanja.

Not just the Ranger.

Not just an ally, a warrior, a force of nature.

But her.

The woman he had given up everything for.

The woman he had lost.

The woman who had just given him everything back.

Loki's fingers curled into the fabric of her tunic, his forehead pressing against her shoulder, his breath ragged and uneven.

His body shook with something he could not name.

Something too big, too powerful, too terrifying.

Because he remembered.

And it was too much.

She just held him.

Steady.

Unwavering.

Real.

And for the first time since he had lost everything—

For the first time since he had been hollowed out and left as nothing but an empty god playing a meaningless game—

Loki was whole again.

The air was still.

Not with the weight of power.

Not with the echoes of battle.

But with something far greater.

Something deeper.

Something that had been lost to time itself… and now had been found again.

And the universe?

The universe held its breath.

Because this moment—

This moment was never supposed to happen.

And yet—

Here they were.

Thor exhaled slowly, pushing himself up, his body heavy, not with wounds—

But with understanding.

For the first time in his long life—

Thor truly saw his brother.

Not just as a trickster.

Not just as a liar, a schemer, a burden, a shadow always slipping through his grasp.

Not just as Loki the God of Mischief.

But as Loki.

Loki, who had sacrificed more than anyone could ever know.

Loki, who had carried an emptiness so vast, so consuming, that it had nearly unmade him.

Loki, who had just been made whole again.

And Thor—

Thor understood.

Strange and Clint had seen many things.

Had stood against impossible forces.

Had faced down death itself.

And yet—

As they stepped closer, cautiously, not daring to disturb the moment unfolding before them—

Neither of them could speak.

Because what they were seeing—

Was not just a reunion.

Was not just a return.

It was a miracle.

Something that should not have been possible.

Something that rewrote the very fabric of fate.

And neither of them—

Dared to break the silence.

Loki had not moved.

He still knelt, his fingers curled into the fabric of her tunic, his breath uneven, his entire body trembling with the weight of what had just been given back to him.

And the Ranger—

She still held him.

She did not speak.

Did not move away.

Did not demand anything of him.

She simply was.

And that—

That was enough.

It was everything.

And then—

Slowly, Loki lifted his head.

His emerald gaze met hers.

And in that instant—

She saw it.

Everything.

The recognition.

The grief.

The relief.

The fear.

The raw, aching, unfiltered emotion of a man who had spent an eternity in the void—only to finally, finally wake up.

And the universe?

The universe wept.

Because gods were not meant to feel like this.

Gods were not meant to break like this.

But Loki had.

And now—

He was whole again.

His hand moved—hesitant at first, as if afraid she would disappear again.

As if afraid this was just another cruel trick of fate.

His fingertips brushed her cheek, the lightest of touches…

And he felt her warmth.

Felt her realness.

Felt everything.

His throat was tight, words forming—

But none of them were enough.

How could they be?

How could any words possibly hold the weight of everything he had just regained?

But then—

She smiled.

Soft.

Steady.

Real.

"*I told you I'd always be here.*"

And Loki—

Loki broke.

Because she had.

Because she always had.

Because even when he had forgotten her, she had never forgotten him.

And for the first time in his life—

He finally believed it.

The world shifted.

The storm that had hung over them was gone.

The fight was over.

The pain remained—but it was no longer unbearable.

Because now—

Now they carried it together.

And when Loki finally, finally spoke—

His voice was not the voice of a god.

Not the voice of a king.

Not the voice of a liar or a trickster or a villain.

It was just his voice.

Soft.

Vulnerable.

True.

"*I remember.*"

And the Ranger?

She nodded.

Her hand still against his cheek.

Her touch still grounding him.

"*I know.*"

And the universe?

The universe exhaled.

Because against all odds—

Against time, against fate, against the will of gods and magic itself—

They had found each other again.

And nothing would ever break them again.

The storm had passed.

The sky was still once more.

The ground no longer trembled beneath Loki’s power.

The realms no longer held their breath in fear.

The world—

The universe—

Moved on.

Slowly.

Quietly.

Because even the most earth-shattering moments must eventually give way to the rhythm of time.

Thor was the first to exhale.

It was a quiet sound.

A sound of relief.

A sound of understanding.

A sound of letting go.

He watched as Loki and the Ranger remained where they were, locked in a moment that only they could understand.

And for the first time—

Thor did not interrupt.

Did not demand an answer.

Did not ask his brother to explain himself.

Because for once—

He did not need an explanation.

He simply understood.

Clint let out a slow, careful breath, running a hand through his hair.

He wasn’t sure if he should say something.

Wasn’t sure if there was anything to say.

Strange, standing beside him, was still as a statue.

Processing.

Analysing.

Understanding the weight of what had just happened.

This wasn't just a reunion.

This was something far bigger.

Something that should not have been possible.

Something that had rewritten fate itself.

And Strange, a man who had spent years trying to untangle the threads of destiny—

Did not know what it meant.

Not yet.

But he knew one thing for certain.

The world had changed.

And the consequences of this moment…

Had yet to unfold.

Loki and the Ranger did not speak.

They did not need to.

She still held him.

He still clung to her, grounding himself in the reality of her presence.

Slowly—

Gently—

She ran her fingers through his dark hair, a soothing motion, a reminder that he was here.

That she was here.

That this was real.

And Loki, who had spent months searching for something he could not name—

Finally understood what had been missing.

And it was her.

It had always been her.

The Ranger was the first to break the silence.

Her voice was soft, steady, a whisper against the still air.

"*We should go home.*"

Loki stilled at the word.

Home.

He did not know where that was anymore.

Not Asgard.

Not some throne.

Not any place he had once thought he belonged.

But here—

With her.

Maybe that was enough.

So he nodded.

Slowly.

Carefully.

And for the first time in what felt like eternity—

Loki allowed himself to breathe.

The world no longer stood still.

The fight was over.

Now, there was only the future.

And what that meant?

What that would become?

None of them knew yet.

But for now—

For this moment—

They simply let the world move on.

Slowly.

Quietly.

And together.

The golden light of the portal flickered softly as all four of them stepped through, leaving the battlefield behind.

No more destruction.

No more rage.

No more emptiness.

Only the quiet embrace of the cabin.

The scent of wood and earth, of old books and lingering herbs, of something familiar, something grounding.

And for the first time in what felt like eternity—

Loki let the tension in his shoulders ease.

Because this place—

This place was safe.

Clint vanished into the kitchen without a word, rolling up his sleeves, moving as if he had always belonged here.

A habit, a rhythm, something normal in the midst of the extraordinary.

He rummaged through the cabinets, pulling together whatever he could find, muttering to himself as he worked.

Stephen, with a quiet flick of his wrist, ignited the fire in the hearth.

The warmth of the flames filled the space instantly, flickering light casting long shadows against the wooden walls.

For a moment, he simply watched the fire.

Then—

Without a word, he turned and followed Clint, giving Loki and the Ranger the space they needed.

Because they both understood.

This moment wasn't for them.

This was theirs.

Loki and the Ranger.

The ones who had defied fate.

The ones who had found each other again.

She was gentle.

No rush.

No words.

Just a soft, steady touch as she guided him to the couch, where the fire's warmth was already wrapping around them like a quiet embrace.

Loki sat down slowly, his movements hesitant, as if he wasn't sure this moment was real.

As if he was still waiting for it to slip away.

The firelight danced in her eyes as she looked at him.

And for a moment—

A long, fragile moment—

He just looked back.

Taking her in.

Committing this to memory.

Because this—

This was real.

She was here.

And she had never stopped being here.

And then—

A whisper.

Soft.

Barely audible.

As if he was afraid saying it aloud might break the spell.

"*Tanja…*"

It was not just a name.

Not to him.

Not to her.

It was everything they had been.

Everything they had lost.

Everything they had found again.

She knelt beside him, her fingers curling gently around his.

A small, simple gesture—

And yet, it anchored him to the present.

Her thumb brushed against his knuckles, slow, soothing.

No demands.

No expectations.

Just her.

Loki exhaled a shaky breath, his other hand coming up, hesitantly, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear, his fingers lingering against her cheek.

He had forgotten this.

Forgotten the way her skin was warm beneath his touch.

Forgotten the way she felt so steady even when the world had crumbled around them.

Forgotten what it was like to not be alone.

"*You're real,*" he murmured, his voice barely above a breath.

A statement.

A confession.

A desperate need for reassurance.

She nodded, tilting her head into his touch.

"*I’m here,*" she whispered. "*And I always will be.*"

And Loki—

Loki closed his eyes for a moment.

Letting himself believe it.

Letting himself breathe.

Letting himself feel whole again.

Epilogue

The Universe Lets Them Rest

The fire crackled softly.

The scent of tea and something warm simmering in the kitchen filled the air.

Clint's low mutterings could be heard as he argued with Strange about proper seasoning.

The world was moving on.

But here, in this moment—

Loki and the Ranger had nothing to do but exist.

Together.

And for now—

For just this night—

That was enough.

The cabin was filled with the gentle crackling of the fire, the soft clink of dishes, the low murmur of conversation.

The world outside was dark, still, silent.

But inside—

Inside, there was warmth.

Inside, there was something fragile, something whole, something waiting to be mended.

And for the first time in what felt like forever, Loki, the Ranger, Strange, and Clint sat together at the same table.

Clint had outdone himself.

Despite the limited resources, despite the fact that he had to improvise half the ingredients, the meal before them was—

Surprisingly delicious.

Rich, warming stew, the kind that stuck to your ribs and chased away the cold.

Freshly baked bread, crisp and golden from whatever magic Strange had subtly used when no one was looking.

Even the tea was flawlessly brewed.

Loki raised an eyebrow, glancing at Clint as he took a slow sip from his cup. "*I never would have suspected you had culinary talents, Barton.*"

Clint smirked, breaking off a piece of bread. "*I have many talents. You just don't appreciate most of them.*"

Loki huffed a quiet chuckle, but for once—

He did not argue.

The Ranger sat beside him, her presence a quiet comfort, their fingers occasionally brushing as they ate.

There were no grand words.

No urgent conversations.

Just this.

This simple, quiet, human moment.

And for a time—

That was enough.

Until Loki broke the silence.

Until he asked the question.

"*What happened?*" Loki's voice was soft, but certain. "*After I… after I erased him. After everything faded.*"

The question hung in the air like smoke.

Strange set his spoon down.

His gaze was unreadable, but not unkind. "*You disappeared.*"

Loki frowned. "*I know that much.*"

"*No,*" Strange corrected. "*You didn't just disappear. You ceased. You were… erased. Not physically. Not dead. But there was no trace of you. Just an emptiness where something should have been.*"

Loki's jaw tensed, but he said nothing.

Strange continued.

"*And she—*" He gestured toward the Ranger, his voice lowering slightly. "*She was the only one who remembered you. The only one left carrying your absence. And it nearly destroyed her.*"

Loki's breath hitched.

His gaze shifted to the Ranger beside him, taking her in as if seeing her for the first time all over again.

The shadows under her eyes, the quiet strength in her posture, the weight she still carried even now.

His chest tightened.

The thought of her being alone in that kind of pain—

It was unbearable.

"*That's where I came in,*" Clint said, rolling his shoulders. "*Strange figured she needed someone who knew how to pull people back from the brink. Someone stubborn enough not to let her disappear into herself.*"

Loki narrowed his gaze, scanning Clint with something unreadable. "*And that was you?*"

Clint huffed, taking a sip of his tea. "*I've been there before. And I wasn't about to let her go through it alone.*"

The Ranger said nothing, but her fingers brushed against Clint's for the briefest of moments.

A silent thank you.

Clint gave her a small nod in return.

And Loki saw it.

Saw the quiet understanding between them.

Saw the respect, the friendship, the unspoken bond forged in pain and survival.

He did not resent it.

He did not interrupt.

Because for once—

He understood.

Clint leaned back. "*She pulled herself out. It took time. A hell of a lot of patience. But in the end? She chose to live. For you. Even when you weren't there anymore.*"

Loki's throat tightened.

The Ranger turned to him, her gaze steady, unwavering, raw.

"*I wasn't going to let your sacrifice be in vain,*" she said softly. "*I wasn't going to waste what you gave me.*"

Loki couldn't speak.

Didn't trust himself to.

So he just—

Looked at her.

Took in the depth of her words, the weight of what she had carried, the strength it had taken to keep going.

And for the first time since he had returned—

He understood just how much she had suffered.

For him.

Because of him.

And yet—

She had still found her way back.

And now, here she was.

With him.

Whole.

Alive.

And the gravity of it all nearly crushed him.

No one rushed to fill the silence.

There was no need.

The fire crackled softly in the hearth.

The warmth of the meal lingered.

And Loki—

For the first time in a long, long time—

Felt something settle inside him.

Not pain.

Not emptiness.

Not the rage that had once consumed him.

Just something quiet.

Something real.

Something he hadn’t dared to hope for.

Peace.

The night was quiet.

The weight of battle, of loss, of pain—

It had settled.

Not forgotten.

Not erased.

But laid to rest.

Because they had earned this.

Every single one of them.

And now—

They let peace finally take hold.

Loki was not a man who thanked easily.

But this was different.

This was not a debt owed.

Not a bargain struck in shadows.

This was something else.

Something that could not be undone.

So as Strange prepared to open a portal, as Clint stretched, getting ready to head out, Loki turned to him.

"*Barton.*"

Clint raised an eyebrow, still holding his half-empty mug of tea. "*Yeah?*"

Loki hesitated.

Then—

He nodded once.

"*Thank you.*"

Clint blinked.

Stared at him for a long moment.

Then smirked. "*Damn, I should have recorded that. You actually do know how to say it.*"

Loki rolled his eyes, exhaling sharply, but there was no true irritation behind it.

Only understanding.

And Clint?

He just nodded.

Because he knew.

Because no more words were needed.

Clint had made a call earlier.

Told Phil Coulson what had happened.

And Phil—

Being Phil—

Had done exactly what needed to be done.

So now, out there in the quiet forest, SHIELD agents patrolled the woods.

Not intruding.

Not interfering.

Just watching.

Because Clint trusted them.

Because the Ranger was family.

Because Loki—

Loki was something else entirely.

And SHIELD was not in the business of making the same mistakes twice.

Strange looked at Loki, then at the Ranger.

He did not ask what came next.

Did not offer advice.

He simply said—

"*Be well.*"

And with that, he opened a portal, stepping through with Clint.

The golden light faded—

And then, at last—

It was just them.

Loki let out a slow breath, running a hand through his hair as he turned toward the fire.

The warmth of the flames washed over him, their light flickering across the wooden walls, casting soft shadows across the room.

The Ranger settled beside him, her presence steady, unshaken, unmovable.

He glanced at her—

And for the first time in too long, he allowed himself to relax.

She curled her legs beneath her, leaning back against the couch.

Loki sat beside her, his gaze locked on the fire, his fingers loosely entwined with hers.

No words.

No rush.

Just this.

A quiet moment.

A moment that belonged to them and no one else.

For so long, he had been fighting.

For so long, he had been searching.

And now—

Now he was here.

With her.

And that was enough.

For tonight.

For this moment.

And as the fire crackled softly, as the world outside faded into peaceful silence, as his grip on her hand tightened just slightly—

Loki allowed himself to breathe.

And the universe?

The universe let them rest.

At last.

The fire burned low in the hearth, its warmth wrapping around them like a gentle embrace.

The world outside was still.

The weight of the night—of battles fought, of memories lost and found—lingered in the air.

But here, in this cabin, in this moment of peace, there was no more war.

No more pain.

No more searching for something that had already been found.

Loki leaned back against the couch, his body finally allowing itself to feel the exhaustion creeping into his bones.

The Ranger was beside him, her presence grounding, steady, whole.

She had always been his anchor, even when he hadn't known it.

Even when he had forgotten her, she had been there.

She had fought for him.

She had brought him back.

And now—

Now, for the first time in what felt like forever, he allowed himself to accept it.

The Ranger reached over, pulling the soft, warm blanket from the side of the couch.

She wrapped it over both of them, shifting slightly to rest against him, her head nestled in the curve of his shoulder.

Loki turned his head, his gaze drifting down to her, watching as she closed her weary eyes, her breath even, steady, safe.

He lifted a hand, fingers brushing through her hair, slow and absentminded.

A gesture of comfort.

A gesture of home.

She sighed softly, leaning further into him.

And Loki?

He let her.

Neither of them spoke for a long time.

There was no need.

But just before sleep could fully take them, she murmured, her voice barely more than a whisper against the quiet night—

"You're here."

A statement.

A truth.

Loki's lips parted, and for a moment, he did not know how to answer.

But then—

His arms tightened around her, holding her closer, as if anchoring them both to this new reality, this life they had fought to reclaim.

"I'm here." His voice was soft, raw, full of something deeper than words could ever say.

She smiled against his chest.

And then, with the fire burning low, the world fading into quiet peace, and the weight of exhaustion finally pulling them down—

They fell asleep.

Wrapped in each other.

Whole.

Together.

And at long last—

At peace.

The first light of dawn crept through the cabin, slipping through the curtains in golden threads, casting a warm glow over the wooden walls.

The fire had burned low in the hearth, now just embers pulsing with faint heat.

And on the couch, wrapped beneath the soft weight of the blanket, they lay together.

Warm.

Safe.

Whole.

For the first time in what felt like an eternity.

Loki was awake.

He had been for a while now, his body perfectly still, his mind quiet in a way that felt foreign yet welcome.

His arms were wrapped around her, the Ranger's head nestled against his chest, her breath slow and steady, her warmth pressed against him like she had always belonged there.

Like she had never left.

His fingers brushed absentmindedly through her hair, slow, careful, as if grounding himself in the truth of her presence.

She was here.

This was real.

Not a cruel trick of fate.

Not a dream that would slip through his fingers when he woke.

Her.

Tanja.

His Tanja.

She stirred slightly in his arms, her breath shifting against his chest, her fingers curling against the fabric of his tunic.

Loki watched her, gaze soft, unreadable, steady.

For so long, he had been lost.

For so long, he had searched for something he could not name.

And now?

Now she was right here, in his arms, breathing softly against him, her heartbeat steady, her presence grounding him in ways he had never known he needed.

How had he ever lived without this?

How had he ever let himself forget?

A soft sigh escaped her lips, her eyelids fluttering slightly.

She was waking.

And Loki?

He was not ready to let go.

The Ranger shifted, stretching slightly, the blanket slipping lower, the cool morning air brushing against her skin.

Then—

Her eyes slowly opened.

Sleepy.

Unfocused at first.

Then—

They met his.

Loki stilled.

And for a moment—

Neither of them moved.

The world held quiet.

His emerald gaze locked onto hers, watching as the moment of awareness flickered behind them—

The realisation of where she was.

The realisation of who she was with.

And then—

A slow, sleepy smile curved at her lips.

And Loki—

Loki felt his heart stop.

Because gods help him—

He had never seen anything so beautiful.

"*Good morning,*" her voice was soft, husky with sleep, warm as the morning sun.

Loki swallowed, his throat oddly tight, his fingers still tangled in her hair.

For a moment, he didn’t know how to answer.

Didn’t know what to say.

Didn’t know how to put into words what this meant—what she meant.

So instead—

His lips curved into something rare.

Something honest.

Something that was not a smirk, nor a mask, nor a calculated expression.

Just him.

"*Good morning,*" he murmured, his voice quieter, steadier, more real than it had ever been.

And as the morning sun bathed them in golden light—

As she leaned into his warmth just a little more—

As Loki let himself breathe her in, memorise this, claim this as something that was his—

For the first time in a long, long time…

The God of Mischief had nothing to run from.

Nothing to chase.

Because he was exactly where he was meant to be.

With her

The Call of Morning Coffee… and Hungry Stomachs

The cabin was bathed in soft morning light, the warmth of dawn creeping through the windows, filling the space with the quiet hum of a new day.

For a moment, they just lay there, wrapped in warmth, in the steady rhythm of their own heartbeats, in the comfort of simply existing together.

Then—

A soft, unmistakable rumble broke the silence.

Loki's brow arched slightly, his gaze flicking to the Ranger.

She blinked, surprised, then groaned, pressing her face into his chest.

"*Oh no…*"

Another rumble.

Louder this time.

Loki chuckled, amusement flickering in his eyes. "*Was that you?*"

"*Maybe…*" came the muffled reply, voice thick with sleep.

Loki smirked, about to make some clever remark—

Then—

His own stomach grumbled.

Loud.

Demanding.

The Ranger froze.

Then—

She laughed.

Not just a small chuckle.

Not just a polite laugh.

But a real, full-bodied, can't-hold-it-in kind of laughter.

Loki sighed dramatically, tilting his head back against the couch. "*Traitorous body…*"

"*Looks like we're both starving,*" she grinned, shifting slightly, stretching beneath the blanket. "*Come on, let's make some breakfast.*"

Loki huffed, pretending to be put out by such mortal concerns—

But the truth?

He hadn't felt this light in ages.

He hadn't laughed like this in far too long.

And if breakfast was the next thing that held them in this small, peaceful moment—

Then he would take it.

So he let her pull him up, rolling his eyes with exaggerated exasperation.

"*Fine, fine. But if you expect me to cook, you may be gravely disappointed.*"

The Ranger smirked. "*Then you're on coffee duty, Trickster. Don't burn it.*"

Loki placed a hand over his heart. "*Darling, I am insulted. When have I ever burned anything?*"

The Ranger arched a brow. "*Do you really want me to answer that?*"

Loki sighed, waving her off with a flick of his wrist. "*On second thought, never mind. Just get to cooking, woman. I'll keep us supplied with caffeine.*"

And so—

With the morning sunlight streaming through the windows —

With laughter still lingering in the air—

With the scent of fresh coffee soon filling the cabin—

They started their day.

No battles.

No cosmic horrors.

No burdens hanging over their heads.

Just breakfast.

Just each other.

And for now—

That was all they needed.

A Few Days of Peace… and an Unexpected Visitor

The days that followed were quiet.

No battles.

No cosmic dangers lurking in the shadows.

Just Loki and the Ranger, existing in the soft rhythm of something new, something rare—peace.

They fell into an easy pattern.

Mornings spent wrapped in blankets on the couch, sipping coffee as the fire warmed the cabin.

Afternoons spent walking through the woods, feeling the sun on their faces, breathing in the fresh air, feeling alive again.

Evenings spent cooking together, teasing and bickering over whose turn it was to make the tea or who had to wash the dishes.

And at night—

They held each other.

Not out of fear.

Not out of necessity.

But because they simply could.

And that?

That was enough.

Until—

A knock at the door.

Loki, lounging lazily on the couch with a book in his hands, narrowed his eyes at the sound.

The Ranger, stretched out beside him, glanced up with mild curiosity. "*Expecting someone?*"

Loki sighed, closing his book with a soft thud. "*If I was, I would not have allowed them to knock.*"

The Ranger chuckled, shaking her head as she pushed herself up and strode toward the door.

She pulled it open—

And there stood Clint Barton, a broad grin on his face, two massive bags of fresh groceries in his arms.

"*Hope you two lovebirds didn't burn the place down yet,*" he smirked, stepping inside without waiting for an invitation. "*Figured you might need some supplies. And let's be honest, you both probably forgot actual food exists.*"

The Ranger rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. "*You're impossible.*"

"*And yet, you'd be lost without me,*" Clint quipped, making his way to the kitchen as if he owned the place. "*Now, which one of you makes better coffee? Because I need some before I even think about cooking.*"

Loki, who had yet to move from the couch, simply watched the entire scene unfold with an expression of pure suffering.

"*Does he ever stop talking?*" he muttered under his breath.

The Ranger grinned, nudging Loki's foot as she passed. "*Nope. Welcome to having friends, Trickster.*"

Loki sighed dramatically but didn't argue.

Because for once—

He didn't mind.

And as Clint started pulling ingredients from the bags, grumbling about *how neither of them knew how to properly stock a kitchen*, as the Ranger laughed and grabbed a pan, as the cabin filled with the warmth of something so ordinary, so human—

Loki found himself smiling.

Because maybe this was what peace looked like.

And for now—

He could live with that.

Loki barely had time to recover from Clint's abrupt arrival before—

Another knock.

This time, he didn't even bother looking up from his book.

"*If another one of your SHIELD friends comes bursting in, I swear—*"

The Ranger laughed, shaking her head as she strode to the door. "*You'll what, Loki? Gasp in mild irritation?*"

She pulled it open—

And there stood Natasha Romanoff.

A small smirk on her lips, an eyebrow raised, a bag dangling casually from one hand.

"*I heard Barton was making one of his legendary game stews,*" she said smoothly, stepping inside as if she had always belonged there. "*And well, I just thought I'd also check in on you two.*"

Her sharp gaze flickered between the Ranger and Loki, assessing, reading everything that wasn't being said.

Loki exhaled slowly, setting his book aside, watching her with suspicion. "*Tell me, Romanoff, do SHIELD agents have some sort of telepathic link that alerts them whenever food is being prepared?*"

Natasha smirked, holding up the bag. "*I brought wine.*"

Clint, from the kitchen, immediately perked up. "*And beer for me?*"

Natasha rolled her eyes. "*Obviously.*"

Clint grinned. "*I knew there was a reason we kept you around.*"

The Ranger stepped aside, motioning Natasha in. "*Come in before Loki slams the door in your face out of sheer dramatics.*"

Natasha chuckled, walking past Loki with a knowing glance. "*Relax, Laufeyson. I didn't come to interrogate you. Just wanted to see if you two were… adjusting.*"

Loki leaned back, arms crossed, studying her. "*And what do you see?*"

She tilted her head slightly, her eyes flicking toward the Ranger for the briefest of moments before settling back on him.

"*I see two people who fought their way through hell… and somehow managed to come back in one piece.*"

Loki said nothing.

Because for once—

He had no clever retort.

Natasha's gaze softened slightly before she turned to the kitchen. "*Now, where's that stew? Because if Clint's cooking, I might actually eat something edible for once.*"

The kitchen filled with the rich, savoury scent of Clint's stew simmering over the fire.

Natasha uncorked the wine, pouring a generous glass for herself and the Ranger while Clint cracked open a beer and tossed another to Loki.

Loki caught it effortlessly, raising an eyebrow. "*Do I look like I drink beer?*"

Clint shrugged. "*What, too unrefined for you, your highness?*"

Loki sighed dramatically, but still took a sip.

The Ranger curled up next to him, her fingers resting lightly on his knee, and he felt it.

The comfort.

The warmth.

The normalcy of it all.

For so long, his life had been chaos, war, betrayal, and survival.

But this?

This was different.

This was peace.

And maybe—

Just maybe—

He could get used to it.

Even if it meant tolerating SHIELD agents in his home.

For now.

For the first time in what felt like forever, Loki allowed himself to relax.

Truly relax.

Not with one eye on the shadows, not with the weight of a thousand battles hanging over him, not with the suffocating emptiness of loss clawing at his chest.

Just—

Here.

Now.

The warmth of the cabin wrapped around them like a well-worn cloak, the fire crackling in the hearth, the rich scent of Clint's stew filling the air.

The Ranger sat beside him, close enough that he could feel her presence without needing to reach for it.

He didn't need to.

She was here.

And that was enough.

"*Alright, prepare to be amazed,*" Clint declared, dramatically setting bowls of steaming hot stew in front of them.

Natasha smirked. "*If you're hyping it up this much, it better be good.*"

"*'Good'?*" Clint scoffed, placing a hand over his heart. "*This, my friends, is legendary.*"

Loki arched an eyebrow. "*You are oddly passionate about this, Barton.*"

Clint pointed at him with a wooden spoon. "*Eat first. Judge later.*"

Loki exhaled through his nose but took a slow, deliberate spoonful.

And—

By the Norns.

It was perfect.

The meat was tender, melting on his tongue with a richness that spoke of hours of slow cooking, of carefully chosen herbs and deep flavours.

The broth was hearty and warm, filling him from the inside out.

It was—

It was comforting.

And for a brief, fleeting moment—

Loki felt something he had not felt in a very, very long time.

At home.

The Ranger hummed in appreciation. "*Alright, I'll admit it—this is amazing.*"

Natasha nodded, taking another bite. "*Fine, Barton. You win this round.*"

Clint grinned. "*Told you. Now, someone pass me another beer before I start crying from validation.*"

As they ate, the conversation flowed effortlessly.

Natasha and Clint bantered back and forth, sharing stories from old missions, ridiculous moments that sounded too absurd to be true.

Natasha smirking as she recounted the time she had made an undercover drop disguised as a wedding guest,

only for Clint to show up in a borrowed tuxedo and crash the event entirely.

"*I was being tactical!*" Clint protested. "*You were taking too long—*"

"*You got drunk on champagne and tried to start a conga line,*" Natasha shot back.

The Ranger laughed, shaking her head. " I'm sorry—*what?*"

"*It was a very strategic distraction,*" Clint insisted. "*And for the record, it worked.*"

Loki, who had been watching the exchange with quiet amusement, shook his head. "*And I was accused of being dramatic.*"

Clint gestured at him. "*See? Even Loki gets it.*"

Loki simply took another sip of wine, a smirk tugging at his lips.

Because this?

This was not something he had ever thought he would experience.

A table filled with laughter, warmth, and easy conversation.

A night spent not in plotting, or fighting, or surviving—

But simply existing.

And—

He realised, with a quiet sort of shock—

He liked it.

By the time the meal was finished, the fire had burned low, glowing embers pulsing softly in the hearth.

Clint leaned back in his chair, stretching. "*Alright, I've outdone myself. I'll accept my culinary award whenever you're ready.*"

"*We'll engrave it on your tombstone,*" Natasha mused, sipping her wine.

The Ranger chuckled, shaking her head. "*It really was incredible, Clint.*"

Loki, who had been absentmindedly tracing patterns on the rim of his glass, tilted his head. "*I suppose I will admit… it was quite satisfactory.*"

Clint squinted. "*Satisfactory?*"

"*Legendary,*" Loki amended smoothly, eyes glinting with mischief.

Clint grinned, clearly pleased. "*Damn right it was.*"

The conversation drifted on, slow and easy, weaving through memories, jokes, quiet stories shared between people who had all seen too much—but still found ways to smile.

And Loki?

Loki listened.

Loki laughed.

Loki felt something settle in his chest.

Because tonight, there were no gods, no soldiers, no battles, no cosmic forces waiting to take something away.

Just them.

Just this.

And for the first time in what felt like centuries—

Loki was at peace.

And it was perfect.

The fire crackled softly, filling the silence between laughter and fading conversation.

The night had settled comfortably around them, wrapping them in something gentle, something that felt earned.

Then—

Clint’s voice, quiet, steady.

Not teasing.

Not sarcastic.

Just honest.

"*How are you?*"

A simple question.

But not really.

Because it held so much more.

The Ranger looked at him first.

And she saw it.

The way his blue eyes softened with something deeper than casual concern.

The way he wasn't just asking to ask.

He meant it.

And not just for her.

For Loki.

For both of them.

Loki felt it too.

His jaw tensed slightly, his fingers tightening around the stem of his wine glass before he set it down carefully.

For a moment, neither of them answered.

Because how could they?

After everything?

After loss, and emptiness, and sacrifice?

After losing themselves and finding their way back to each other again?

How were they?

They didn’t know.

The Ranger was the first to speak.

She inhaled slowly, grounding herself, feeling Loki’s presence beside her—

His warmth.

His existence.

She turned to Clint.

And she told the truth.

"*I’m healing.*"

Not fine.

Not perfect.

Not unscathed.

Just—

Healing.

And that?

That was enough.

Loki’s gaze flickered toward her, something undecipherable passing behind his eyes.

Then—

He spoke too.

His voice lower, but just as raw.

"*I… am here.*"

It was the most honest thing he could say.

Because that was all that mattered.

Not the scars.

Not the memories of what he had lost and regained.

Just this.

He was here.

With her.

And for the first time in forever—

That was enough.

Clint held their gazes for a long moment.

Then, he nodded.

A simple gesture.

A quiet acceptance.

Because he understood.

Because he'd been there, too.

And Natasha, watching silently, took a sip of her wine and murmured,

"*Healing is good.*"

Loki glanced at her, surprised by the softness in her tone.

By the understanding in her expression.

But he didn’t question it.

Didn’t need to.

Because for once—

There were no more walls between them.

No more games.

Just a quiet, simple truth.

They were alive.

They were here.

And that?

That was everything.

The conversation shifted back to lighter things.

The fire burned low.

The night stretched on, filled with soft laughter, warmth, and the presence of those who mattered.

Clint didn’t push further.

Natasha didn’t pry.

Because they didn’t need to.

They had their answer.

And for tonight—

That was enough.

Tomorrow would come.

The future would unfold.

But for now?

They were healing.

They were here.

The fire had burned low, its glow casting long, flickering shadows across the walls.

Outside, the forest was quiet, wrapped in the stillness of the night, the crisp air whispering through the trees.

Inside?

Inside, there was warmth.

Inside, there was something rare.

Something worth holding onto.

And none of them were quite ready for it to end.

"*Alright, I'm not moving,*" Clint announced, stretching his legs out and leaning back against his chair. "*Too much stew. Too much wine. I live here now.*"

Natasha rolled her eyes. "*You're hopeless.*"

"*I'm practical,*" he shot back. "*And you know what? The fire looks better than the table. I vote we migrate.*"

The Ranger chuckled. "*You're just looking for an excuse to get more comfortable.*"

"*Damn right I am.*"

Loki exhaled sharply, shaking his head, but when the Ranger nudged him gently, he sighed in mock defeat.

"*Fine. But if you expect me to carry you there, Barton, you'll be sorely disappointed.*"

Clint smirked. "*Oh, I'd expect nothing less from you, your highness.*"

With that, they shifted—moving from the dining table to the plush rugs and cushions scattered near the hearth, sinking into the familiar warmth of the fire.

Loki settled against the couch, the Ranger curling up beside him, her warmth pressing into his side.

Natasha leaned against Clint, the two of them huddled comfortably, their friendship an unspoken, unwavering force.

No battles.

No strategy.

No need for words.

Just quiet companionship.

Loki wasn't sure when he had last experienced this.

Not the silence of solitude.

Not the restlessness of waiting.

But something else entirely.

Something he had never realised he craved.

Something whole.

His fingers traced absentmindedly over the Ranger's hand, not to comfort her, but to ground himself.

She let him.

Didn't pull away.

Didn't say anything.

Because she understood.

Because she always understood.

Clint let out a deep sigh. "*Man, if every night could be like this, I might actually retire.*"

Natasha smirked. "*You? Retire? That's cute.*"

"*Hey, a guy can dream.*"

The Ranger chuckled, tilting her head against Loki's shoulder. "*And what would you even do with yourself, Barton?*"

"*Herd sheep. Grow tomatoes. Become a professional stew chef.*"

Natasha laughed. "*You'd last a week before you got bored.*"

"*Maybe two,*" he admitted. "*But still. I'd try.*"

Loki watched them, their easy conversation, their quiet teasing, and something settled inside him.

For so long, he had believed that connection was a fleeting thing, something that could only end in betrayal.

But this—

This was different.

This was real.

And for the first time in a long, long time—

He let himself believe in it.

The fire burned lower, the warmth sinking into their bones, lulling them into a peace none of them had dared hope for.

There was no rush to leave.

No urgency to part ways.

The world outside could wait.

For now—

For tonight—

They were just people.

People who had lost too much, fought too hard, and somehow—

Somehow still found each other.

And that—

That was everything.

So they stayed.

Huddled by the fire.

Wrapped in warmth and quiet laughter.

Loki held the Ranger close.

Natasha leaned against Clint, eyes half-lidded, her guard — for once— lowered.

And as the embers glowed softly in the hearth, as the night stretched on in perfect peace,

The universe?

The universe let them rest.

Just a little longer.

Because they deserved it.

The quiet didn't last forever.

It never did.

The sound of a Quinjet landing cut through the stillness of the night, its engines a low, steady hum as it descended into the clearing near the cabin.

Clint let out an exaggerated sigh, stretching his arms behind his head. "*Guess that's our ride.*"

Natasha exhaled slowly, rolling her shoulders before pushing herself upright. "*And I was actually enjoying myself.*"

Clint groaned. "*Yeah, yeah. Same here. Damn SHIELD, always ruining perfectly good moments.*"

Loki, still settled against the couch with the Ranger beside him, arched an eyebrow. "*It's almost as if you work for them.*"

"*Almost,*" Clint muttered, running a hand through his hair.

Then—

A knock at the door.

Natasha stood, casting a quick glance toward the Ranger.

The Ranger met her gaze—then nodded.

Nat opened the door.

And there, standing in the cold night air, was Phil Coulson.

A man who had, once upon a time, died at Loki's hand.

Coulson's expression was calm, unreadable, steady as ever.

His sharp gaze flickered briefly toward Loki, but he made no comment.

Then—

He looked at the Ranger, offering a small, professional nod. "*I hope I'm not interrupting.*"

Loki let out a soft scoff. "*You are.*"

Coulson's lips twitched slightly. "*Good to know some things never change.*"

Natasha stepped aside, allowing him in.

As Coulson entered the cabin, his presence felt like a weight of reality settling over them.

Not dangerous.

Not threatening.

Just—

A reminder.

That the world outside was still moving.

That their peace could not last forever.

Coulson took a moment to glance around.

The empty plates from dinner still on the table.

The warmth of the fire still crackling in the hearth.

The Ranger and Loki, still huddled together on the couch.

His gaze lingered on them for just a second longer before he turned to Clint and Natasha.

"*You two ready?*"

Natasha nodded, already reaching for her jacket. "*I assume this isn't just a social call.*"

"*Unfortunately, no,*" Coulson replied. "*Director Fury wants an update on some… developments.*"

Clint groaned, pushing himself up. "*Yeah, yeah. I'm coming.*"

Then—

Coulson turned his attention back to Loki and the Ranger.

And this time, his expression shifted.

Something more serious.

More measured.

"*I know you've both been through a lot,*" he said carefully. "*And I wasn't sent here to pull you into anything. But…*" He hesitated. "*There are things happening, things Fury wants eyes on. I don't expect either of you to care, but I figured you should at least know.*"

Loki tilted his head, gaze sharp. "*Why?*"

Coulson held his stare.

"*Because whatever's coming*— you two might be the only ones who see it for what it really is.*"*

The words hung in the air for a moment.

Not a demand.

Not an order.

Just a quiet offering.

A warning.

Loki's fingers tightened around the Ranger's hand, almost imperceptibly.

She felt it.

Understood it.

But she also saw something else in Coulson's eyes.

Something unspoken.

Something bigger than the bureaucracy of SHIELD.

Something real.

Natasha sighed, glancing back at them. "*No one's expecting an answer now. Just think about it.*"

Clint, ever casual, threw them both a lazy salute before following her out the door.

Coulson hesitated for just a second longer, then gave the Ranger a small nod.

"*Take care of yourselves.*"

Then he was gone.

The door clicked shut.

And the quiet returned.

But it was different now.

Because the world outside?

It was moving again.

And sooner or later—

They would have to move with it.

Loki let out a slow breath, his free hand rubbing over his face, exhaustion creeping in again.

The Ranger didn’t move.

Didn’t speak.

Just stayed beside him.

Loki finally muttered, "*They never truly leave us alone, do they?*"

The Ranger smiled faintly, leaning back against him. "*No. But we still have tonight.*"

He exhaled slowly.

Then—

He let it go.

Because she was right.

The world would come for them eventually.

But not yet.

For now—

The fire still burned.

And so they stayed.

Together.

And the universe, for just a little longer, let them be.

The Story of Loki and the Ranger

Book 2

Mythos

The air shimmered, bending reality for a fleeting second before solidifying once more. A portal snapped shut behind them with an almost imperceptible hum, leaving Loki and the Ranger standing in the centre of Director Fury's office.

Loki's stance was effortless, regal even, hands folded behind his back as his gaze flicked across the room with a quiet curiosity. The Ranger, by contrast, carried herself with that steady, ever-watchful readiness—the kind that spoke of someone who had long learned to expect the unexpected. Both knew this meeting wouldn't be routine.

Seated at the long conference table, Phil Coulson barely reacted to their entrance. His face was neutral, professional, but the subtle tension in his shoulders spoke volumes. Of course, he had been briefed. Of course, he had known Loki would be here. And yet, knowing and experiencing were two vastly different things.

There was a flicker in his eyes when they landed on Loki—just a split-second of something colder beneath the surface. The kind of memory that didn't fade, no matter how much time had passed.

Loki, ever the master of social cues, caught it instantly. His lips curled in the faintest ghost of a smirk—an amusement, a challenge, or perhaps something more unreadable. His voice was smooth as silk when he finally spoke.

"Agent Coulson. I do hope there are no hard feelings."

A beat of silence. Then, calmly, coolly, Phil responded.

"Just the one."

If Loki was affected by the reminder of past transgressions, he didn't show it. The Ranger, meanwhile, exhaled quietly, already bracing herself for the inevitable friction.

Fury, leaning against the desk, let the moment hang in the air before finally breaking it. "Alright, ladies and gentlemen, let's not waste time. We have a situation."

The large monitor behind him flickered to life. On-screen, the faces of two familiar agents appeared—Clint Barton and Natasha Romanoff.

"Good to see you're all still breathing," Clint said dryly. "Let's hope that lasts."

Natasha, ever the efficient one, got straight to the point. "We've been tracking a black-market network dealing in stolen high-tech and alien artefacts. It's deep underground—dangerous, well-funded, and well-connected. We're talking highly classified SHIELD tech, Asgardian relics, even Kree and Skrull weaponry. If it's rare, if it's powerful, they're selling it."

She tapped on her screen, and the image shifted to grainy security footage—an auction hall, shadowy figures, glimpses of advanced weaponry being exchanged like simple trinkets.

"Which brings us to why we're all here." Fury's gaze hardened. "Phil, you're going in. And you're not going alone."

There it was.

Loki didn’t react, as if he’d expected this from the start. The Ranger simply inhaled, awaiting the inevitable fallout.

Phil blinked, expression blank. "You’re putting Loki on an intelligence op? That’s your idea of a sound plan?"

"Not just Loki," Fury clarified. "The Ranger, too. All three of you will be on this one."

Phil’s jaw tightened, but he exhaled through his nose, keeping himself measured. "Director, I understand the need for cooperation. But putting me in the field with—"

Loki’s amused hum cut through his words. "Do say it. I’m quite curious."

Phil ignored him."—with an unstable variable is a risk we don’t need."

Fury’s eye twitched. "What we don’t need is this thing spiralling out of control because we didn’t use every advantage we had. You need intel, Loki knows the kind of people we’re dealing with. The Ranger knows how to handle both of you. So unless you’re planning to walk out of this briefing, you’re working together."

Clint gave an unconvincing thumbs-up from the screen. "You’ll be fine. Probably."

Phil exhaled sharply. The Ranger didn’t miss the way his fingers curled slightly against the table’s edge before he let them relax again. A controlled breath. A decision made.

"Fine," he said at last, voice clipped. "But if he so much as—"

"Oh, do try to be more original," Loki drawled. "We all know how that sentence ends."

The Ranger resisted the urge to sigh.

This was going to be a long mission.

Fury's stare was sharp enough to cut through metal. "Listen up, because I'm only going to say this once."

He leaned forward, bracing both hands on his desk as his gaze locked onto Coulson's. "I don't like this any more than you do. But facts don't care about feelings. And the fact is—we need Loki on this mission."

Phil's jaw was tight, but he didn't interrupt. He knew better than to push when Fury had that look in his eye.

Fury continued, voice measured but firm. "We're dealing with stolen high-tech, alien artefacts, and magical relics. Which means we need someone who actually understands what we're looking at. You think you've got someone better than the guy who's been alive for over a thousand years? Who's seen more magic and alien tech than any of us could even comprehend?"

Silence.

Fury didn't wait for an answer.

"Loki has been around longer than this damn planet's had written history. He's walked through realms you and I

can’t even name. He knows magic, he knows artefacts, and most importantly—he knows how to find the people who deal in them."

Phil exhaled through his nose, still skeptical, but he didn’t argue.

Fury’s gaze shifted, locking onto the Ranger. "And she’s here because there isn’t a single person in SHIELD who can see the connections she does."

The weight of his words settled in the room.

"The Ranger notices patterns no one else picks up on. She can tell you who’s lying, who’s scared, and who’s holding the real power in a room full of con artists and killers. You think you can outmanoeuvre an entire black-market empire without that kind of advantage? You can’t."

Fury straightened, letting the silence sink in before delivering the final blow.

"So, unless you’ve got a literal god of mischief and the best damn observer I’ve ever met hidden up your sleeve—this is your team."

The weight of the words settled.

Loki stood motionless, expression unreadable—but the way his lips curved just slightly made it clear he had enjoyed that particular speech.

The Ranger, meanwhile, remained composed. Not smug, not surprised. Just listening.

Phil, to his credit, didn't argue. He just exhaled, a long, slow breath, then nodded once. "Alright," he said. "I hear you."

There was no enthusiasm in his voice. Just acceptance.

Fury nodded back. "Good. Now let's get to work."

Perfect! Let's move into the next part of the briefing. The mission is coming together, and we're setting the stage for the auction where things will take an unexpected turn.

Natasha's voice cut through the moment of silence, businesslike as ever.

"We've got a location for the next auction," she said, tapping her screen. The monitor behind her flickered, bringing up a sleek, dimly lit underground venue. The image was grainy—low-quality security footage, but it was enough to get a sense of the place. Polished floors, chandeliers, a bar stocked with drinks worth more than most cars. And, of course, high-end clientele—people who could buy and sell small countries without blinking.

Clint let out a low whistle. "Fancy crowd. Too bad we weren't invited."

Loki hummed, hands folded behind his back as he studied the image. "Invitations are such an outdated concept," he mused. "And so… optional."

Phil glanced at him warily. "Meaning?"

Loki's smirk widened, like a cat about to toy with its prey. "Meaning, dear Agent Coulson, that the guest list is hardly a concern. I could have our names appear on it with the flick of a finger." He raised one elegant hand, rolling his fingers as though plucking strings of unseen magic.

Phil's eyes narrowed. "And how do we know that won't set off alarms?"

"Oh, please," Loki scoffed. "This is me we're talking about. These people deal in stolen relics and intergalactic contraband. Do you honestly think their security measures will be enough to catch me?"

Natasha didn't argue. She simply turned to Fury. "If he can get us in clean, that's our best option. Security at these places is layered—facial scans, voice recognition, payment records. But if our names are already in the system, we don't have to fake anything."

Fury exhaled sharply. "Fine. But if this goes south, I expect you—" he pointed at Loki, "—to get us out."

Loki gave an elegant half-bow. "Why, of course, Director. I wouldn't dream of abandoning you."

Phil muttered something under his breath, but let it slide.

Natasha pulled up another image. "The auction is in two days. That gives us time to gather intel and prep. We need to know who's selling, who's buying, and what the real prize of the night is."

She clicked to the next slide—an item list. Blurred descriptions, vague labels. Unknown origin. Artefact presumed to hold latent power.

Loki's gaze flicked over the screen, scanning quickly.

Clint leaned back, arms crossed. "Looks like the usual: high-tech weapons, alien junk, some stuff that probably shouldn't be in human hands."

Phil nodded. "Our priority is the Asgardian artefact. The one SHIELD flagged two months ago."

The screen zoomed in on a grainy, distorted image of a small, metallic device—sleek, with faintly glowing etchings.

Loki's expression didn't shift, but something changed in his posture.

Fury caught it. "What is it?"

Loki studied the image for another second before speaking, voice softer this time. "That," he said, "is not Asgardian."

Silence.

Phil frowned. "Then what is it?"

Loki's eyes flickered with something unreadable.

"A problem," he said.

—

Briefing Room – SHIELD HQ

Loki's words lingered in the air like a silent threat.

"That is not Asgardian."

Phil's frown deepened as he studied the grainy image on the screen. "Then what is it?"

Loki's expression remained unreadable, but the shift in his demeanour was subtle—his shoulders a fraction tenser, his eyes holding a glint of something... calculated.

"A problem," he repeated.

Fury didn't look pleased. "You want to elaborate on that?"

Loki tilted his head slightly, as if weighing his words. "It is... familiar," he admitted. "But it does not belong to Asgard. Nor to any of the usual suspects—Kree, Skrull, or even the remnants of the Dark Elves." His gaze flickered back to the screen. "Which means whoever possesses it has acquired something they do not fully understand."

"Or," the Ranger interjected, arms crossed, "they do understand it—and that's the real problem."

Loki's lips curled slightly at that—an almost imperceptible nod of approval.

Fury exhaled sharply. "Great. So, we're walking into an auction where someone might be selling something unknown, possibly dangerous, and definitely in the wrong hands."

Clint sighed. “Sounds like a Tuesday.”

Natasha ignored him, shifting the discussion forward. “We go in under deep cover. No weapons unless absolutely necessary—these places have scanners, and the security is paranoid. Our best bet is playing the part.”

Phil nodded. “Loki gets us on the guest list. Ranger, you’ll be scanning the room—watching for anything out of place. Buyers, sellers, security, and whoever’s paying too much attention to us.”

“Speaking of roles,” Clint cut in, smirking. “Who’s playing what? You know these places. It’s not just about money—it’s about power, reputation.”

Natasha pulled up a new screen, showing dossiers of the kind of clientele they’d be mingling with.

“The guests will be politicians, warlords, tech giants, and black-market kingpins. It’s not just about flashing cash—it’s about being the kind of person who belongs in the room.”

Her gaze flicked to the Ranger first. “You? You’ll be my associate. High-end acquisition specialist—someone who deals in rare finds.”

Then, to Phil. “Coulson, you’re the broker. The middleman. The one handling negotiations and making sure we don’t get caught up in a bidding war we can’t win.”

Clint raised a brow. “And Loki?”

Loki smiled—slow, knowing.

“I shall be precisely who I am,” he said smoothly. “A prince with a taste for the rare and exotic. No one will question my presence.”

Phil’s sigh was nearly imperceptible. “Wonderful.”

Fury cut through before the tension could escalate. “Alright. We move in two days. That gives us time to do recon and prepare.” He turned to Loki. “You get us on that guest list cleanly. No red flags.”

Loki placed a hand on his chest in mock offence. “Director, I would never be so careless.”

Phil muttered under his breath, “Right. Because that’s never happened before.”

Loki’s grin widened.

Fury ignored them. “Romanoff, Barton, I want backup options in case we need an alternative exit. I don’t want to be trapped in a room full of criminals with nothing but magic and good intentions.”

“Copy that,” Clint said.

Fury’s gaze swept over the team one last time. “This has to be clean. No screw-ups. Get in, get the artefact, get out.”

He gave Loki a particularly hard look.

“And stick to the damn plan.”

Loki's smirk didn't falter. But for just a fraction of a second—so quick it could be imagined—his fingers twitched behind his back.

Because something in that auction hall was going to change everything.

He just didn't know it yet.

—

Auction Night – Arrival at the Event

The car pulled up to the entrance in smooth silence, the hum of the engine fading as a valet stepped forward. The grand estate before them was bathed in golden light, its towering columns and opulent architecture exuding the kind of wealth that made kings and warlords feel at home.

Loki emerged first, the very embodiment of effortless grace. His attire was nothing short of exquisite—a deep emerald-green suit, tailored to perfection, trimmed in black with subtle gold embroidery woven along the cuffs and collar. It was regal, refined, and impossible to ignore. He wore it like a second skin, as though the very air around him was meant to bow in deference.

The Ranger stepped out next, slipping her hand into Loki's waiting one. Her gown was a masterwork—elegance and power intertwined. Deep, rich colours that shimmered under the lights, the fabric flowing like liquid metal with every step. Every inch of her presence was perfectly curated for this world—someone who belonged

among the elite, a woman whose reputation preceded her. Loki had insisted on nothing less.

Phil exited last, dressed in a sharply tailored black suit—understated, professional, and completely Phil. He adjusted his cuffs, ever the practical one, his gaze already scanning the entrance.

“Showtime,” he muttered.

Loki smiled as if he’d just stepped into his natural element. He didn’t hesitate, didn’t slow down—he walked through the entrance like he owned the entire event, because in a way, he did. The guards at the entrance barely glanced at them before stepping aside.

"Names?" one asked, though it was only a formality.

Loki barely turned his head as he passed them. "Check your list," he murmured lazily.

The man did. His eyes flicked to the screen, and whatever he saw made him tense just slightly before quickly standing at attention.

"Apologies, my lord. Welcome."

Phil’s brow twitched at that. My lord?

Loki simply smiled, patting the guard’s shoulder like one would a loyal hound before continuing inside, the Ranger moving fluidly beside him.

Phil followed, jaw tight.

Inside, the room was a masterpiece of indulgence. Chandeliers dripped with crystals, casting golden hues over silk-draped tables and polished marble floors. Waiters in crisp uniforms wove through the elite guests, offering glasses of aged wine and exotic spirits. Conversations hummed—a blend of languages, low murmurs, and laughter laced with hidden threats.

Loki thrived in this environment. He moved like a shadow through candlelight—elegant, unbothered, utterly at ease. Because he was royalty. These people postured and preened, desperate to command attention. Loki didn't have to. He already had it.

The Ranger, ever at his side, saw everything. Every glance cast their way, every forced smile, every micro expression that gave away tension, greed, or masked fear. She could feel the shifting energies of the room—who was here to do business, who was here to deceive, and who was merely playing pretend. It was exhausting—the constant flood of information, the weight of it pressing into her skull.

But then—Loki.

His hand grazed the small of her back, a subtle anchor. A reminder that she wasn't alone in this.

A flicker of amusement played in his voice as he leaned in, just for her to hear.

"Deep breaths, my love. If you burn out too soon, I'll be left to suffer this insufferable lot on my own."

His teasing tone did the trick. The noise in her head softened.

Phil, however, wasn’t amused.

He watched Loki like a hawk, eyes narrowed. Not trusting him one bit.

It wasn’t just about old grudges—though there were plenty of those. It was about the way Loki fit into this world too damn well. The way he moved, the way people responded to him, the way he always seemed one step ahead.

Phil had seen Loki play the long game before. He wasn’t going to let him play it now.

"Eyes on the prize," Phil murmured lowly, just loud enough for both of them to hear.

Loki smirked, lifting a glass of deep amber liquid from a passing tray.

"Oh, Agent Coulson," he said, voice smooth as silk. He swirled the drink idly, then took a slow sip, as if he had all the time in the world.

"You wound me."

Loki moved like silk through water—fluid, effortless, magnificent.

He didn’t just exist in this world—he commanded it. With each step, each glance, each measured smile, he wove himself into the fabric of the evening, becoming a presence that could not be ignored.

The Ranger, ever at his side, matched his grace, her presence just as commanding but in a way that was quieter, sharper, more dangerous in its subtlety. While Loki drew attention, she absorbed information. Every glance, every shift in body language, every unconscious tick of a bidder's fingers against their glass—she caught them all.

And there were dangerous people here.

Very dangerous people.

Her eyes flitted across the crowd, making a mental note of the ones who mattered most.

The Mogul: A billionaire industrialist, hands wrapped around a crystal tumbler, swirling the liquid inside with slow deliberation. He didn't just throw money at problems—he created them.

The General: Military-trained, scars visible beneath the crisp collar of his uniform. He wasn't just here to buy—he was here to control. His gaze was locked on every weapon-related item like a hawk eyeing prey.

The Whisper: An older man in an impeccable three-piece suit, seemingly unassuming—but the aura around him was wrong. He never moved without purpose, never spoke without intent. His network ran deeper than anyone in this room realised.

The Unknown: No name, no real record. But the way security treated him said everything. He had power—the kind that made people disappear without a trace.

She leaned in ever so slightly toward Loki. Her voice was barely a breath.

"Left side—bar. That man with the platinum cufflinks. No name on record, but he's the one everyone is pretending not to notice."

Loki's lips barely moved. "Mmm. How delightfully ominous."

The Ranger's fingers twitched against his arm—a silent warning.

"He's dangerous, Loki. And not in the fun way."

Loki's smirk softened, just slightly. A flicker of something warmer, something only she would catch.

"Noted, my love."

And yet, neither of them changed course. They continued to move through the crowd, perfectly at ease, perfectly in place. Like they belonged here.

And that's what made Phil uneasy.

Phil Coulson wasn't new to undercover work. He wasn't easily rattled.

But watching them work this room?

It made something in his gut twist.

He leaned against the bar, an untouched glass of whiskey resting in his hand, his sharp eyes never leaving them.

Loki and the Ranger weren't just blending in—they were thriving.

Too well.

Loki was Loki—charming, intoxicating, completely unreadable. He laughed, whispered in the right ears, made casual conversation with people who could wipe entire cities off the map. And they welcomed him, trusted him.

But it was her that truly unsettled Phil.

She was just as natural in this world. She walked the tightrope perfectly, reading the room in ways that even SHIELD's best analysts couldn't match. And it wasn't just observation—she knew how to move, how to interact, how to manipulate just enough to draw out the truth without ever letting anyone know they were being played.

And worse?

Some of these people knew her.

It was subtle, barely perceptible—but Phil saw it. A glance of recognition. A flicker of familiarity in the way someone greeted her. A moment where a known weapons dealer's lips quirked up just slightly as she passed, like he remembered something that wasn't on any SHIELD file.

Phil's grip tightened around his glass.

"What the hell have they been involved in?"

He trusted her more than he'd ever trust Loki.

But standing here, watching them slip through this room so effortlessly, something gnawed at him.

They weren't just undercover.

They belonged.

And that was what scared him the most.

The auction hall buzzed with hushed negotiations and the clinking of crystal glasses, but away from the sea of power players, the three of them found a quiet alcove—dimly lit, tucked just beyond the main floor. A place to regroup, unseen.

The Ranger leaned against the wall, exhaling slowly. The exhaustion in her shoulders was subtle, but Loki saw it immediately.

Phil followed them in, still watchful, still processing what he had just witnessed.

"Alright," he said, keeping his voice low, measured. "What are we dealing with?"

The Ranger ran a hand over her face, forcing herself to push through the fog in her mind. "Too many power players in one place. Some of them expected—others, not so much." She took a slow breath. "The Whisper is here."

Phil frowned. "The Whisper?"

Loki answered for her. “A name, or rather, a title,” he murmured. “One that belongs to a man who never speaks louder than a breath but has toppled entire governments with nothing more than a suggestion.”

Phil’s face darkened. “Fantastic.”

“The Unknown is here, too,” the Ranger continued, eyes sharp despite her exhaustion. “The one security won’t even look at.”

Phil processed that for a beat. “So what I’m hearing is that we’re surrounded by some of the most dangerous people on the planet.”

Loki’s lips twitched. “Isn’t it thrilling?”

Phil shot him a flat look. “Yeah. That’s the word I was going for.”

The Ranger exhaled again, closing her eyes just for a second. The sheer amount of input she had been processing was draining, and she could feel her shields slipping. The micro expressions, the undercurrents of conversation, the weight of every unspoken intention in the room—it was like being in a constant storm of noise.

Loki moved before she even spoke.

Without a word, he reached out, pressing two fingers against her temple for just a second—a quiet touch, a flicker of cool magic against her skin.

The noise in her head softened.

Her shoulders loosened.

Loki dropped his hand, watching her carefully. “Better?”

She nodded, the tension in her frame easing. “Better.”

Phil froze.

It wasn’t just what Loki had done—it was how he did it.

The gentleness. The concern. The way he had reached for her without hesitation, without expectation, without the usual arrogance or smugness that came with every other move he made.

He had soothed her. Protected her.

And it had been so natural.

Phil’s mind stuttered, trying to process this version of Loki—one that was caring. Protective. Almost... loving.

He had seen Loki play many roles. Trickster. Manipulator. Liar. God of Chaos.

But this?

This was real.

Phil didn’t know what to do with that.

He shifted his stance, looking at the Ranger instead. “How much do you have left in the tank?”

She rolled her shoulders, taking another deep breath. “Enough. I just needed to reset.”

Loki's gaze lingered on her for another second, as if assessing—making sure she wasn't just saying it for their benefit.

Phil caught that, too. Damn it, he really does care.

And suddenly, Phil wasn't sure who he was supposed to be watching anymore.

Just as the tension in their quiet corner began to settle, a waiter approached.

His movements were careful, precise—not the usual brisk efficiency of staff trying to remain unseen. No, this one wanted to be noticed.

"Apologies for the intrusion," he said, voice smooth, respectful. "But an esteemed guest has requested an audience."

The Ranger's spine straightened instantly. She knew.

Loki simply smiled. "Oh? And who might this mysterious host be?"

The waiter's expression remained unreadable, but his tone shifted—softer, more deliberate.

"The Whisper."

Phil stiffened. The Ranger exchanged a glance with Loki, and even he—for just a flicker of a second—seemed to assess the situation with more care than usual.

The Whisper didn't summon people for entertainment. If he wanted a conversation, it meant he was either testing them or he already knew something they didn't want him to know.

Loki's smirk returned, effortless, unshaken. "Well, it would be rude to decline, wouldn't it?"

The Ranger exhaled, shifting her mental shields into place once more. She glanced at Phil.

"Stay close," she murmured.

Phil did not like this. Not one bit.

But this was Loki's domain, and the Whisper had specifically invited them, not him.

"I'll keep an eye on things," he muttered, watching as Loki offered his arm to the Ranger with practiced ease.

They moved through the crowd once more, this time with a purpose.

The Whisper's table was deliberately placed in the shadows.

It was still within the auction hall, but just slightly removed—a space of power. From here, one could see everything without being seen.

The man himself was exactly as the Ranger had described earlier—quiet, unassuming, yet carrying an aura of absolute control. His face was lined with age, but not weakness. Every movement was intentional, every glance calculated.

He did not rise when they approached.

He simply gestured to the seats across from him.

“Prince Loki.” His voice was barely a breath, but it commanded attention all the same. “And the elusive woman at your side.” His eyes flicked over the Ranger, assessing, as though seeing far more than what was physically there.

She didn’t react—didn’t stiffen, didn’t flinch. She simply held his gaze, silent.

The Whisper’s lips barely curved. “Fascinating.”

Loki took his seat with fluid grace, but it was not submission. It was the posture of someone who knew he was just as dangerous as the man across from him.

“Now,” the Whisper continued, lacing his fingers together, “I imagine you are wondering why I requested this little conversation.”

Loki leaned back, lazy amusement in his voice. “Oh, I do love a bit of mystery. Do go on.”

The Whisper exhaled softly—an approximation of a chuckle. “Word travels, Prince. And word has it that you know a thing or two about the item I seek.”

The Ranger kept her expression neutral.

Phil, watching from a distance, kept his hand close to his concealed comm.

Loki, ever unbothered, simply arched a brow. “Do I, now?”

The Whisper’s gaze was piercing. “I think you do.”

Then, with the slow deliberation of someone who had never once needed to rush for anything in his life, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a small, sleek datapad.

He tapped the screen once.

A hologram flickered to life.

An artefact.

Not the one SHIELD had sent them to retrieve—but still something ancient. Something wrong.

Loki’s expression didn’t shift.

But the Ranger felt it.

A fraction of a second. A barely-there tension in his posture.

Whatever this was, Loki recognised it.

Which meant this just got a lot more complicated.

The Whisper studied his reaction, the hint of a smile in his eyes. “Now,” he murmured, “shall we talk business?”

Loki tilted his head, gazing at the flickering hologram with something that might have passed for idle curiosity.

But the Ranger knew better.

She could feel it—the almost imperceptible shift in his posture. The whisper of amusement curling at the edges of his lips.

Oh, he knew exactly what he was looking at.

The Whisper, ever patient, waited.

The silence stretched just long enough to become intentional.

Then, finally, Loki exhaled through his nose—soft, almost disappointed.

"Ah," he murmured, leaning back, fingers tapping against the armrest. "So that’s what you’re after."

The Whisper remained still, watching.

Loki gestured toward the hologram lazily, his tone dripping with the kind of exasperated condescension that only someone truly in the know could wield.

"Forgive me, but I must ask—who sold you this nonsense?"

The Whisper’s expression remained unreadable. "I was under the impression it was... rare."

Loki sighed. "Rare? Perhaps. But valuable?" He scoffed. "Tell me, do you enjoy wasting money?"

The Whisper’s fingers twitched ever so slightly—a subtle tell.

The Ranger caught it.

Loki did too.

"Oh dear," Loki purred, a smirk tugging at his lips. "You've already placed a bid, haven't you?"

Still, the Whisper didn't react. But that, in itself, was a reaction.

Loki grinned.

"Ah, well. Far be it from me to crush your investment dreams, but I suppose I must enlighten you—seeing as I am an expert in such things." He waved a hand toward the projection dismissively. "What you are looking at is nothing more than a disposable piece of intergalactic trash."

The Whisper remained silent, but the air between them shifted.

Loki continued, ever the master storyteller.

"These weapons were designed for short-term use. A few high-impact discharges, and then—" he snapped his fingers, his smirk widening. "Poof. Useless. The power core overheats, burns itself out, and what you're left with is a rather expensive paperweight."

The Whisper's gaze narrowed.

Loki arched a brow, feigning concern. "Oh dear. No one told you that?"

The Ranger watched everything—not just Loki's performance, but the Whisper's reaction.

The man was composed, but there was something sharp behind his eyes now. A flicker of irritation. Not shock—no, the Whisper never allowed himself to be truly caught off guard—but the subtle shift of someone who had just received unexpected, inconvenient information.

It meant one of two things:

One: He already knew and wanted to see if Loki did too.
Two: He hadn't known, and now, he was silently recalculating his entire strategy.

Either way, Loki had just upended the game.

The Whisper finally spoke.

"If this were true," he murmured, voice barely a breath, "why would so many still seek it?"

Loki hummed. "Ah, the beauty of desperation. People are fools when they crave power, are they not? If they believe a thing is valuable, they will fight for it—no matter how worthless it truly is."

A beat of silence.

The Whisper regarded Loki for a long moment, then turned his gaze to the Ranger.

She felt it—his eyes, like a slow-moving tide, measuring not just what she said, but what she didn't.

"And you?" His voice was quiet. "Do you share his assessment?"

She met his gaze without hesitation.

"I know a scam when I see one," she said evenly. "And I know how to tell when someone's been played."

A pause.

Then—a faint chuckle.

Soft, almost imperceptible.

The Whisper leaned back, steepling his fingers. "Interesting."

Another pause. Then, with a slow nod, he dismissed the hologram.

Loki’s smirk deepened.

Checkmate.

The Whisper exhaled slowly. "You have given me much to consider."

Loki dipped his head in mock deference. "It is my pleasure to prevent a man of your stature from making such a grievous financial error."

The Whisper watched him carefully. "I wonder," he mused, "do you make a habit of advising potential rivals for free?"

Loki laughed.

"Oh, dear Whisper," he purred, standing gracefully. "I would hardly call you a rival. That would imply we were playing the same game."

The Ranger felt the ripple of power in the room.

Something unspoken passed between them.

The Whisper studied him for another second—then inclined his head ever so slightly.

A silent acknowledgment. A moment of understanding between two predators.

Loki offered his hand to the Ranger, guiding her effortlessly from her seat. She took it without hesitation.

Phil, still watching from across the room, saw the smallest hint of amusement in the Whisper's gaze as they turned away.

And for the first time, Phil truly wondered—

Who was playing who?

The three of them slipped away from the Whisper's table, weaving seamlessly back into the crowd as though nothing of consequence had just transpired.

But Phil knew better.

He had watched every movement, every shift, every word that hadn't been spoken but had still carried weight. And

now, as they settled once more in a quieter corner of the auction hall, he couldn't ignore the gnawing feeling in his gut.

Loki, ever the picture of composed arrogance, turned to them with a pleased smirk. "Well, that was invigorating, wasn't it?"

Phil folded his arms, unimpressed. "Invigorating isn't the word I'd use."

The Ranger exhaled quietly, already sensing the tension simmering beneath Phil's measured demeanour.

Loki chuckled, shaking his head as though Phil's concern was nothing more than a passing breeze. "Oh, come now, Coulson. If the Whisper were truly displeased, we wouldn't still be standing here. And," he added, smoothing the lapels of his jacket, "I do believe I just saved him an exorbitant amount of money. He should be thanking me."

Phil's jaw twitched.

"You know," Phil said, voice even, "for a second, I almost thought you were going to play along with him. Let him buy into that scam just so you could use it later."

Loki's smirk widened. "Tempting, but no. If I wanted to manipulate him, I'd have done it with actual leverage. Not discarded intergalactic trash."

Phil's eyes narrowed, watching him carefully. "That's what bothers me."

Loki arched a brow. "That I did the right thing?"

Phil didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he studied Loki, his gaze steady, searching—because this version of Loki didn't fit with the one he had memorised.

Loki had always been unpredictable. Cunning. Self-serving.

But tonight?

Phil wasn't so sure.

Loki exhaled, as if sensing Phil's relentless scrutiny was going to linger longer than he'd prefer. He let out an exaggerated sigh and glanced at the Ranger. "I do believe our dear agent is in dire need of a drink. As am I."

He gave her a brief nod, a silent promise that he would return, before sauntering off toward the bar.

And as soon as he was out of earshot, Phil turned to the Ranger.

"Okay," he said, voice lower now, his usually unreadable expression giving way to something closer to conflicted.

She didn't press him. Just waited.

Phil ran a hand over his jaw, exhaling sharply. "What the hell happened to him?"

The Ranger tilted her head slightly. "What do you mean?"

Phil let out a small, humourless huff. “This.” He gestured vaguely toward where Loki had disappeared into the crowd. “The Loki I knew would’ve let the Whisper buy that thing. Hell, he would’ve sold it to him himself just to string him along for more leverage.”

She held his gaze, her own steady. “And what did he do instead?”

Phil hesitated. “He—”

She didn’t let him finish.

“He told the truth,” she said simply.

Phil frowned.

She took a step closer, voice quiet but certain. “Loki isn’t the same person who stabbed you through the chest, Phil. He’s not the same person who tried to take New York.”

Phil exhaled slowly, shaking his head. “You sound so sure.”

“I am.”

Phil studied her.

There was no doubt in her tone. No hesitation.

And that unsettled him almost as much as Loki’s behaviour tonight.

Because she wasn't naïve. If anything, she was more perceptive than anyone in this room. She saw things people didn't want to be seen.

And yet—she trusted Loki.

Phil finally spoke, quieter now. "What changed him?"

The Ranger's gaze softened, and she hesitated. Just for a moment.

Then she exhaled. "He lost everything."

Phil blinked.

She continued, voice measured but laced with something deeper—something that felt like understanding.

"His home. His mother. His place in the universe. Everything he thought he had—everything he thought he was—it all fell apart."

Phil swallowed.

He had read the files. He had known about Frigga. About Asgard. About all the pieces that had crumbled around Loki since New York.

But reading something in a report was different from hearing it like this.

From someone who had actually been there.

The Ranger sighed, shaking her head. "He's still arrogant. Still reckless. Still has enough of a superiority

complex to drive anyone insane." A small, amused smirk flickered across her lips before fading.

"But he's not the same person who stood on Stark Tower and declared himself a god."

Phil's jaw tightened.

Because the more she spoke, the more he believed her.

And the more he believed her, the less sure he was of everything he had built around the idea of who Loki was.

Before he could respond, a familiar voice slid back into the conversation.

"How touching," Loki purred, reappearing with two glasses in hand. He passed one to the Ranger smoothly before turning to Phil, that ever-infuriating smirk returning. "Were you both reminiscing about my misdeeds? Or has Coulson finally admitted I'm utterly charming?"

Phil gave him a long look, taking the glass Loki handed him.

"Not quite there yet," he muttered, taking a sip.

Loki chuckled, swirling the drink in his own glass before glancing at the Ranger. His expression softened just slightly, almost imperceptibly. "I do hope you weren't revealing all my secrets, my dear."

The Ranger met his gaze, unreadable for a moment. Then—just the slightest curve of her lips.

“Just a few,” she murmured.

Loki huffed a small, amused breath before sipping his drink.

Phil watched them.

And the unease in his chest didn’t fade.

Not because he thought Loki was lying.

But because—for the first time—he wasn’t entirely convinced he was the villain in this story anymore.

Phil wasn’t sure when he stopped hearing the conversation around him.

The noise of the auction hall—the murmured negotiations, the polite laughter, the sharp clink of crystal glasses—all of it faded.

Because all he could do was watch.

He told himself he was just keeping an eye on Loki. That it was instinct. That he was still waiting for the inevitable slip, the moment when the trickster prince showed his true colours.

And yet—

What he saw didn’t make sense.

Loki had always been a snake. A predator slithering through the world, waiting for the perfect moment to

strike. His words were poison wrapped in silk, his actions calculated for maximum chaos.

But here—

Here, he was something else entirely.

His fingers brushed against the Ranger's wrist as he handed her the drink, a touch so light, so deliberate, that Phil almost missed it. But he didn't.

Because she leaned into it.

It was small. Subtle. The kind of movement a person wouldn't think twice about unless they were trained to notice everything.

Phil noticed.

The way her shoulders relaxed, just slightly, as soon as Loki's presence grounded her again. The way she didn't flinch away from the contact—if anything, she sought it.

The way he stood beside her—not possessive, not demanding, but anchoring.

Like he could feel the weight of everything she was absorbing in this room, the thousands of details, the emotions, the silent wars waged through glances and micro-expressions—and he knew how heavy that burden was.

And instead of mocking it, instead of dismissing it—

He carried it with her.

Phil saw the way Loki's hand hovered just close enough to hers, as if ready to catch her should she need it. The way his fingers traced along the stem of his glass, the movement absent, but his focus entirely on her.

And she trusted him.

Completely.

It wasn't just the way she looked at him—it was what she wasn't doing.

She wasn't guarded. She wasn't weighing her words or filtering her expressions.

She was at ease.

With Loki.

And Phil didn't understand.

Because he knew what Loki was. What he had done.

Loki was evil.

Loki had slaughtered people without hesitation. He had tried to burn the world down just to prove a point. He had stabbed Phil through the chest without a second thought.

And yet—this Loki?

This Loki was tender.

This Loki protected.

This Loki knew her so well that he could ease her stress with nothing more than a glance, a touch, a well-timed word.

How?

How could someone so ruthless be capable of something so gentle?

Phil swallowed, shifting his stance, suddenly feeling like he had been dropped into a reality he didn't recognise.

Had Loki always been this way? Had he always been capable of this kind of affection—this kind of love?

Or had something changed him?

And the bigger question—the one Phil didn't want to ask but couldn't ignore—

If Loki was capable of this…

Was it possible that Phil had been wrong about him?

The soft chime of a bell rang through the grand hall, a signal for the guests to take their seats. Conversations drifted into murmurs, then faded into a hush of anticipation.

Loki, ever the picture of unbothered elegance, guided the Ranger effortlessly toward their assigned seats near the front—prime positioning for serious bidders.

Phil followed, still watching him, still trying to make sense of what he had just seen.

But there was no time for reflection now. The auction was beginning.

A sharply dressed auctioneer stepped onto the raised platform, his voice smooth and practiced as he welcomed the exclusive clientele. His every word was carefully measured, just the right amount of charm and control to keep the room balanced between eager buyers and cutthroat competitors.

And then—

The first major item was revealed.

A sleek, metallic device was carefully placed on a black velvet display stand, spotlights illuminating the intricate, glowing etchings that ran along its surface.

The artefact.

The one they were sent to retrieve.

Phil’s jaw tightened slightly. The intel had suggested it was of Asgardian origin—but Loki had already debunked that. Whatever this thing was, it wasn’t from his home.

Which meant they were still playing a game without knowing all the rules.

The auctioneer smiled as the first bids rolled in.

"Shall we begin the bidding at two million?"

The room responded immediately.

Figures were called out in quick succession, numbers climbing with practiced ease. These people weren't amateurs—they knew how to play the game.

But they weren't playing against Loki.

Loki exhaled, as if bored already.

Phil barely saw the flicker of magic, but he felt it—the air shifted, a pulse so subtle that no one else in the room noticed.

And then, effortlessly, Loki raised his hand.

The auctioneer's gaze snapped toward him instantly.

"Prince Loki offers six million."

A murmur rippled through the room.

Phil almost rolled his eyes. Of course Loki was going to be theatrical about this.

The other bidders hesitated. Some glanced toward Loki, as if weighing whether challenging him was worth the risk.

One man, a polished executive with silver-streaked hair, called out, "Seven million."

Loki turned his head slightly, peering at the man as though he had just witnessed a particularly unimpressive party trick.

He didn't speak. Didn't react.

Just lifted his hand again.

"Ten million," the auctioneer declared.

Silence.

The executive hesitated. Shifted in his seat.

Then, with a small, controlled nod—he conceded.

Phil had to admit—it was almost unfair.

Loki didn’t have to outbid them. Didn’t have to bluff or strategise.

All he had to do was exist.

Because who, in their right mind, was going to challenge a god?

The auctioneer’s smile widened. "Going once. Going twice—sold to Prince Loki."

A polite round of applause rippled through the crowd, but no one was truly surprised.

Loki offered the Ranger a lazy smirk, drumming his fingers against the polished armrest.

"Child’s play," he murmured.

Phil huffed a breath. "You’re enjoying this too much."

Loki laughed. "Oh, Agent Coulson, I haven’t even begun."

The artefact was swiftly secured, tagged for discreet delivery. Phase one—complete.

Phil should have felt relief.

But then—

The next item was brought out.

And the moment Loki saw it—

Everything changed.

Loki was still basking in his small victory, fingers idly tracing the rim of his glass. The artefact was secured, and he had played the game exactly as expected—effortlessly.

It was over.

Or so he thought.

The auctioneer clapped his hands, signalling the next item.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our next piece is a truly extraordinary find—an artefact of unknown origin, believed to possess latent magical properties."

Phil barely paid attention at first. They had what they came for. This wasn’t their concern.

But then—

The display case was unveiled.

And Loki stopped breathing.

The world narrowed.

Because there—resting on black velvet, gleaming under the low lights—was a deep, dark blue gemstone pendant.

The chain was delicate, silver-threaded with runes almost too faint to see.

But Loki knew them.

He had traced them beneath his fingers a thousand times as a child. Had watched as Frigga held it between her palms, whispering ancient words of power before pressing a kiss to his brow.

It was hers.

His mother’s.

Loki’s fingers curled against the armrest, tension lacing through his spine.

The Ranger felt it immediately. She turned, the shift in his entire being unmistakable.

"Loki—" she started, voice low.

But he didn’t hear her.

Not over the roaring in his ears.

Not over the voice in his head screaming this should not be here.

It should not be in this place. In their hands. In this wretched, vile auction hall meant for criminals and scavengers.

"Shall we begin the bidding at one million?"

The first hand went up.

Another followed.

The price climbed fast. Too fast.

Someone knew what it was. Someone knew.

Loki’s heart pounded. No. No, no, no—

He wouldn’t let them have it.

He wouldn’t let anyone have it.

Without hesitation, he lifted his hand.

"Five million," the auctioneer called, surprised by the sudden jump.

Phil turned toward Loki sharply.

This wasn’t the plan.

Loki was supposed to be playing the part—calm, detached, methodical. But there was nothing detached about him now.

His expression was cold—not playful, not amused. His emerald eyes burned with something dangerous.

The bidding didn’t stop.

"Six million."

"Eight."

"Ten."

The numbers climbed, but Loki didn’t blink.

Another bidder—a man Phil had already marked as a high-level dealer in stolen relics—raised his hand.

"Fourteen million."

Loki turned his head sharply toward him.

The sheer weight of his gaze made the man falter—just for a second.

Loki lifted his hand again.

"Twenty million," the auctioneer announced, excitement creeping into his voice.

A murmur spread through the room.

Phil felt his pulse tick up.

This wasn’t about the money.

This was a battle.

The auctioneer thrived in moments like these. The energy, the tension, the promise of exorbitant wealth changing hands in a matter of seconds.

"Do I hear twenty-two?"

The other bidder hesitated.

He didn’t want to back down. But he also wasn’t stupid.

Something shifted in the air.

Phil felt it. The Ranger felt it. Everyone felt it.

Because Loki was no longer just bidding.

He was daring.

Daring anyone to challenge him.

The air around them tightened—a subtle, creeping energy that didn’t belong in a civilised auction.

Magic.

Power.

It slithered into the spaces between breaths, wrapping around the room like a silent warning.

The other bidder swallowed, looking away.

He wouldn’t go higher. He wouldn’t risk it.

"Going once."

Phil barely breathed.

"Going twice."

The gavel lifted.

"Sold—to Prince Loki."

A pause.

Then, the applause.

But no one was smiling.

Not really.

Because everyone had felt it.

The shift.

The unspoken message.

This hadn’t been an auction.

It had been a claim.

And Loki had made it clear:

This was never up for debate.

—

The auction carried on, but the air had changed.

Loki sat back in his chair, relaxed only in appearance. The Ranger could feel it—the coiled energy beneath his skin, the way his thoughts were running too fast, too sharp.

She didn’t know why.

But she knew it was bad.

Phil didn’t say anything—not at first.

But he was watching.

Watching the way Loki’s fingers rested near the armrest, not quite clenched but not fully relaxed.

Watching the way the Ranger’s gaze flicked toward him, concerned, but silent.

Watching the way Loki wasn’t smirking anymore.

Then, from behind them—

A soft chuckle.

Low. Measured.

They turned as a shadow stepped forward.

The Whisper.

Phil tensed.

The Whisper was the kind of man who moved when he wanted to, not when the room allowed it. And yet, here he was.

"Curious," he murmured, stepping into the dim light of their private alcove. "I expected you to be a ruthless

bidder, Prince Loki. But I did not expect…" His gaze flicked toward the pendant. "Such determination."

Loki’s expression didn’t change.

But the Ranger could feel the way the energy in the room had tightened around them.

Phil felt it too.

Because this wasn’t just an observation.

This was a challenge.

The Whisper tilted his head slightly. "Tell me… what is it about this particular artefact that you find so… precious?"

The air between them went silent.

Phil’s pulse ticked up.

Because he could see it.

See the way Loki’s muscles tensed for a fraction of a second before he forced himself to stay still.

See the way his usual smirk didn’t come.

See the way he wasn’t answering.

And that?

That was new.

That was very new.

The Whisper’s lips barely curved. "Ah," he murmured, voice barely a breath. "So there is a story, after all."

Loki’s jaw twitched—so fast that if Phil weren’t trained to notice, he would have missed it.

But he saw it.

He saw it.

And suddenly—

He knew.

He didn’t know the details yet. Didn’t know the history.

But he knew one thing for certain.

This pendant wasn’t just something Loki wanted.

It was something he needed.

And for the first time, Phil Coulson realised something about Loki that he had never considered before.

Loki wasn’t just playing a game.

Loki cared.

And that—

That was more dangerous than anything else in this room.

The Whisper watched Loki with careful intrigue, waiting for an answer that would never come.

But what he received instead—

Was something far worse.

The room shifted.

The golden glow of the chandeliers no longer felt warm. The air grew heavier.

And Loki—

Loki did nothing.

Didn't move. Didn't smirk. Didn't speak.

But his presence—

It changed.

The shadows around him thickened, curling at the edges of the dim candlelight like they were alive.

Like they were watching.

The air in the room, once filled with hushed conversation and the clinking of glasses, turned thick—a suffocating weight pressing down on the senses.

A whisper brushed against the very edge of thought—too faint to be a voice, too real to be ignored.

Phil heard it.

The Ranger heard it.

And from the slight shift in the Whisper's posture—he heard it too.

Something ancient. Something unspoken.

A warning.

Phil felt the back of his neck prickle, his instincts screaming that something was wrong.

Because this wasn't Loki being dramatic.

This wasn't theatrics.

This was something deeper.

The shadows at Loki's feet stretched, slow, deliberate—unnatural.

A slow curl of darkness at the edges of the Whisper's own shadow, creeping toward him like a silent, stalking thing.

Phil saw it.

Felt it.

And for the first time since he had met the Whisper, he saw something flicker across the man's composed face.

Something dangerously close to—

Apprehension.

The Whisper, ever unreadable, tilted his head, studying Loki with newfound calculation.

Not curiosity.

Not intrigue.

But caution.

The silence stretched, clawing into the space between them.

Loki didn’t blink.

Didn’t shift.

His expression remained the same—but his gaze?

His gaze was a void.

It wasn’t a warning.

It was a promise.

And for all his influence, for all his power—even the Whisper understood.

He inclined his head slightly, the movement slow. Measured. A silent concession.

"Enjoy your purchase, Prince Loki," he murmured, his voice quieter than before.

And then—just as smoothly as he had appeared—

He stepped back.

Turned.

And left.

He did not press further.

Phil exhaled slowly.

The air lightened, but the weight of what had just happened lingered.

The shadows at Loki's feet receded—not in fear, but like something called away.

Still, he did not move.

Phil wanted to say something.

Something sharp, something sarcastic, something that would shake off whatever the hell had just happened.

But one look at Loki—at the way his gaze remained locked on nothing, unblinking, unreadable—

And Phil realised—

He didn't want to know what Loki would say.

Not yet.

Not here.

The Ranger, ever attuned, placed a hand on Loki's arm. Grounding him.

His head turned, ever so slightly.

And then—

The moment passed.

Loki blinked, reeling himself back into the present.

The mask slipped back into place. The smirk returned. The shadows faded.

"Well," he hummed, adjusting his cuffs like nothing had happened. "That was tedious."

Phil’s jaw tightened.

He had a thousand questions.

But none of them could be asked here.

Because whatever that pendant was—whatever it meant to Loki—

It had been worth revealing a side of himself that none of them had ever seen before.

And Phil Coulson was going to find out why.

The applause had barely faded before Loki stood, smooth and deliberate, as though the entire evening had been nothing more than a minor diversion.

With effortless grace, he accepted the case containing the pendant from the auction staff, his expression unreadable.

Then—without hesitation—he turned to the Ranger.

No words.

Just an offered hand.

She took it.

And together, they left.

Phil followed, barely keeping his composure as they elegantly strode out of the auction hall, weaving through the stunned, whispering crowd.

Because everyone had seen what had just happened.

Everyone had seen the way the shadows had thickened.

Everyone had seen the way Loki had taken something that was clearly more than just an artefact.

And Phil was losing his patience.

By the time the car doors shut behind them, sealing the three of them in a pocket of tense silence, he couldn’t hold it in any longer.

"The mission," Phil bit out, his voice dangerously controlled, "was to retrieve the artefact—the one SHIELD flagged—and get out."

Loki, seated beside the Ranger, exhaled deeply amused, gaze flicking toward Phil with mock innocence.

"And yet," he mused, crossing one leg over the other, "here we are. With both items secured. I fail to see the issue, Agent Coulson."

Phil’s patience snapped.

"You fail to see the issue?" His voice rose, his usually calm, collected demeanour cracking. "You just—you nearly started a damn war in there! Every single person in that room saw what you did! You might as well have walked in, slammed a dagger on the table, and announced that you were claiming the thing as some kind of—of—"sacred relic!"

Loki’s smirk vanished.

And Phil didn’t like that.

Because Loki was always smirking.

The Ranger placed a calming hand on Phil’s arm, her voice steady but firm.

"Phil," she said, measured, "Loki doesn’t do things without reason. If he wanted that pendant that badly, there’s a reason for it."

Phil scoffed. "Right. Because the God of Lies is just dripping with good intentions."

The Ranger met his gaze, unwavering. "He hasn’t lied to me yet."

Phil huffed, shaking his head. "That you know of."

The tension in the car thickened.

Loki hadn’t moved. Hadn’t spoken.

He simply sat, staring out the window, fingertips resting lightly against the case that now held the pendant.

Phil’s gaze flicked to it. Then, back to Loki.

"Go on, then," he said, arms crossed. "Explain."

Silence.

For a moment, it seemed like Loki wouldn’t answer.

Then—

Without looking at them, his voice came quietly.

"It belonged to my mother."

Silence.

The weight of those words sank in immediately.

The Ranger’s breath hitched.

Phil blinked. "What?"

Loki finally turned his head, his expression calm but unreadable.

"It belonged to Frigga," he repeated. His fingers ghosted over the case absently. "It should not have been there. It should not have been in their hands."

The Ranger felt the air shift.

Because this wasn’t a performance.

Loki had many masks. Many layers. Many ways to deceive.

But this was real.

She had seen the way he had looked at it. The way his entire being had changed the moment he saw it.

She swallowed, her voice softer now. "Loki…"

He said nothing.

Phil, however, wasn’t convinced.

His skepticism fought against the truth staring him in the face.

Because the Loki he knew didn’t care about anything but himself.

The Loki he knew didn’t feel loss.

The Loki he knew didn’t look like this.

Didn’t sit completely still, as though movement itself might crack something inside of him.

Didn’t stare at an object like it was the last piece of a world that no longer existed.

Phil’s jaw clenched.

"You expect me to believe," he said slowly, "that the only reason you nearly shattered the entire auction's power structure tonight was because of… sentiment?"

Loki's gaze snapped to him.

And Phil immediately regretted the words.

Because Loki's eyes weren't cold.

They were burning.

Not with anger.

Not with rage.

But with something far more dangerous.

Something Phil didn't know how to process.

"Believe what you will, Agent Coulson," Loki said smoothly. But there was an edge to his voice. "It is of no consequence to me."

Phil clenched his fists. He still wasn't sure.

Still couldn't fully wrap his head around it.

But the Ranger…

She understood.

She understood exactly.

Because she knew what it meant to lose something.

What it meant to have a piece of someone you loved stolen from you.

And she knew that no matter what else Loki had done—no matter how dangerous he was—

This moment was not about power.

This moment was not about deception.

This moment was grief.

And for that, she placed her hand over his—light, grounding.

Not pushing. Not forcing.

Just offering.

Loki didn’t pull away.

Didn’t speak.

But his fingers tightened around the case.

Phil exhaled, rubbing his temples. His voice was quieter now, but still laced with frustration.

"You realise," he muttered, "that this just put a damn target on your back, right? Probably ours too."

Loki’s lips twitched. The smirk returned—but barely.

"I do believe I sent a rather clear message," he mused. "They would be wise to leave it be."

Phil shook his head. "And if they don’t?"

Loki’s gaze flicked back toward the window.

"If they try," he said simply, "I will end them."

Silence.

The Ranger squeezed his hand briefly before letting go, allowing him to breathe.

Phil, arms still crossed, let out a long sigh, finally accepting that this mission had officially gone off the rails.

But for the first time, as he glanced at Loki, then back at the pendant—

He wasn’t sure if that was a bad thing.

—

The car hummed softly as they pulled onto the dimly lit road leading away from the auction hall, leaving behind the heavy weight of too many eyes and unspoken questions.

Phil sat in the back seat, arms crossed, jaw tight.

Loki, still composed, gazed idly out the window, his fingers absently resting on the case in his lap—Frigga’s pendant now in his possession, where it belonged.

The Ranger sat beside him, calm but alert, one hand loosely resting on her knee, the other occasionally brushing against Loki’s—a silent reassurance.

Phil let out a breath through his nose.

He had more to say.

More questions. More concerns.

His mouth opened—

"Don’t," the Ranger said, immediately shutting him down.

Phil blinked. "I wasn’t—"

Her eyes locked with his and he gritted his teeth because he knew no more words would be accepted.

He exhaled sharply, frustrated. But for once, he let it go.

He didn’t like this. Didn’t like feeling unsettled.

Didn’t like the fact that Loki, for all his usual arrogance, wasn’t saying anything.

Didn’t like the fact that he had seen something tonight that didn’t fit into any version of Loki he had ever known.

So instead of pushing—

He sat back, exhaling through his nose.

And the rest of the drive was silent.

The moment they stepped into the safe house, the air shifted.

Mission mode.

The pendant was no longer the focus.

It was back to business.

Phil wasted no time, setting down the artefact they had originally come for on the steel table in the centre of the room, immediately beginning the process of scanning it with SHIELD's portable systems.

The room was dimly lit, the hum of computers filling the space as screens flickered to life.

Loki, now rid of his refined auction attire, leaned lazily against the far wall, watching.

The Ranger pulled off her earrings—small listening devices SHIELD had provided—and let herself breathe.

And then—

The comms buzzed.

Phil tapped the screen, and the secured video feed connected.

Fury's one good eye stared at them through the monitor, his usual stoic expression unreadable.

To his left, Natasha sat with arms folded, gaze sharp.

To his right, Clint leaned forward slightly, chewing idly on a toothpick—casual, but focused.

"Tell me you got something," Fury said, his tone leaving no room for nonsense.

Phil gestured to the artefact. "We secured the piece you flagged. Running scans now, but it's definitely not Asgardian." His gaze flicked toward Loki. "He confirmed that much."

Fury's eye narrowed. "Then what the hell is it?"

Loki exhaled deeply bored. "A discarded relic of some forgotten species who lacked the foresight to build weapons that last longer than a handful of uses."

Natasha arched a brow. "So… junk?"

Loki smirked. "Expensive junk."

Fury didn't look pleased. "Tell me you got something useful out of this."

Phil hesitated. "Not exactly what we expected, but… we picked up a name."

That got everyone's attention.

Fury leaned forward slightly. "Go on."

Phil exhaled. "We don't have much. But during the auction, certain key players were whispering about someone new. Someone big."

He tapped the screen, pulling up the fragmented data SHIELD had managed to scrape from intercepted communications.

One word stood out.

MYTHOS.

Silence.

Clint frowned. "That’s it? That’s all we’ve got?"

Natasha tilted her head slightly, her expression unreadable. "That’s more than we had yesterday."

The Ranger studied the name on the screen.

Something about it felt… wrong.

Not familiar. Not recognisable.

But wrong.

Loki, however—Loki did not react.

Not outwardly.

But the Ranger, standing closest to him, felt the barest shift in his energy.

He knew something.

And he wasn’t saying it.

Phil rubbed his temples. "All we know so far is that he’s a mastermind. Brilliant. Dangerous. We don’t know his real name. Don’t know where he operates. Just that he’s been pulling strings behind the scenes—and that whatever’s happening in this black-market network… he’s connected."

Fury exhaled. "Find out more. Fast. If this guy is as big as people are making him out to be, we can't afford to be playing catch-up."

Natasha nodded. "We'll run deeper background searches—see if we can cross-reference the name against known players."

Clint leaned back, stretching his arms behind his head. "So basically, we've got a name. A shadow. And zero idea what he's planning."

"Not yet," the Ranger murmured.

Fury's gaze swept over them, then landed on Loki.

"You ever hear of this Mythos?"

A pause.

Loki met his stare calmly.

And then—a smile.

Smooth. Lazy. Completely unreadable.

"Can't say I have," he lied effortlessly.

Phil narrowed his eyes.

Because if there was one thing he was certain of now…

It was that Loki never reacted to nothing.

And Mythos?

Mythos wasn't nothing.

—

Loki's fingers drummed idly against the armrest of his chair, his gaze fixed on the glowing name on the screen.

Mythos.

A whisper in the dark. A rumour passed between the desperate and the powerful.

He had heard it before.

Not in the halls of Asgard. Not among the grand warriors or scheming nobles.

But in the streets.

In the corners of realms where power thrived in secrecy.

Where names were spoken only in hushed tones.

Where even the most ruthless criminals chose silence over defiance.

But who—or what—Mythos truly was?

That, even Loki did not know.

Yet.

A single glance to his right told him the Ranger was watching him.

One brow arched, expectant.

Waiting.

For an answer.

Loki simply offered a languid smile.

"Curious, isn't it?" he murmured, reclining back. "A name so carefully spoken, yet without a face to claim it."

Phil's eyes narrowed. He didn't buy the performance for a second.

"You've heard it before," he said flatly. "You just don't know who it is."

Loki tilted his head slightly. "Perceptive, Agent Coulson. Perhaps SHIELD has trained you well, after all."

Phil exhaled sharply, dragging a hand over his face. "Fantastic."

Fury's voice cut through the tension, all business. "I don't care how much or how little you know, Loki. If there's even a chance this guy is a key player in the network we're tracking, I want every single lead followed."

"Well," Loki sighed dramatically, "if you insist."

The Ranger still hadn't looked away from him.

And he felt it.

That quiet, unwavering scrutiny.

She was reading him.

As she always did.

And despite himself—he let her.

Because she was one of the few people in this wretched organisation that Loki didn't hate having inside his head.

Fury's voice came sharp through the screen. "I'll have Hill run deeper data sweeps. If there's a pattern, we'll find it."

Then, without a moment wasted, he cut the feed.

The screen went dark.

Silence settled in the room.

But only for a second.

Natasha leaned forward slightly, pulling up new coordinates on the console before sending them directly to Phil's device.

"Here," she said. "We got intel that one of the warehouses connected to this black-market network might be traced through someone in this area."

Phil studied the map, frowning. "That's pretty remote."

Nat nodded. "That's the point. No cameras, no prying eyes. If there's a major supplier running things from behind the scenes, they'll be keeping their distribution lines hidden."

Phil’s expression darkened. "And what’s the catch?"

Nat smirked faintly. "The guy you need to talk to? Doesn’t like SHIELD."

Phil scoffed. "Shocking."

She sat back, crossing her arms. "He’s paranoid, and for good reason. But if anyone knows where the shipments are moving, it’s him."

The Ranger studied the map over Phil’s shoulder. "And you can’t go yourself?"

Nat’s expression shifted slightly—frustration carefully masked. "No. I’ve got another assignment pulling me in the opposite direction."

Phil glanced at her. "Bigger threat?"

Nat didn’t answer immediately.

Which was an answer in itself.

"I’ll handle it," she said simply. "But it means I won’t be there to back you up."

Phil sighed, pocketing the device. "Great. So we’re going in blind with a guy who already wants us dead."

Clint, still lounging in the background, grinned. "Sounds like a fun night."

Phil shot him a look. "I’d trade places with you in a heartbeat."

Clint popped the toothpick out of his mouth. "Yeah, no thanks. Have fun."

Phil exhaled, turning back toward Loki and the Ranger. "Alright. We head out at first light."

Loki arched a brow. "Oh, how riveting. An early morning excursion into hostile territory. Shall I bring tea and scones?"

Phil rolled his eyes. "Just bring your usual level of restraint."

Loki smirked. "Ah, Agent Coulson, that is an impossible request."

The Ranger, who had been silent through the exchange, finally spoke.

"Get some rest," she murmured, gaze still locked on the coordinates. "Tomorrow, we see how deep this thing really goes."

Loki hummed. "Oh, I do love a good mystery."

Phil just shook his head.

Because something told him that whatever they were walking into next—

Mythos was already watching.

Morning came with the quiet weight of an approaching storm.

The safe house was still, save for the occasional hum of distant city life beyond its walls. But inside, preparations were being made.

The Ranger was already geared up—not in full combat attire, but carefully chosen civilian clothing that would allow her to blend into the kind of place they were about to walk into.

Phil, arms crossed, studied the information on their contact.

Name: Dante Reznik
Affiliations: Suspected black-market logistics operator
Paranoia Level: Extremely high
Likelihood of cooperating: Low

Phil sighed, rubbing his temple. "So let me get this straight—we're sending you in first to… talk to him?"

The Ranger adjusted the strap of her coat, giving Phil a knowing look. "I'm good at reading people. If he's going to give us anything, I'll know how to make it happen."

Phil glanced at Loki, who was leaning against the doorway, arms crossed, looking thoroughly entertained.

"And if he doesn't talk?" Phil asked dryly.

Loki's smirk deepened. "Then I shall offer my… assistance."

Phil exhaled sharply, shaking his head. "That's what I was afraid of."

The meeting point was a run-down storage facility on the outskirts of the city—one of those forgotten places where no one asked questions and no one remembered faces.

Phil and Loki stayed behind, hidden but close enough to intervene. This was the Ranger's play first.

She stepped into the dimly lit space, scanning the cluttered office that smelled faintly of sweat, old cigarettes, and paranoia.

Dante Reznik sat hunched over a cluttered desk, rubbing his fingers together anxiously as she entered.

His eyes darted around the room—searching for an escape route before the conversation had even started.

"Who the hell are you?" he muttered, shifting uneasily.

She moved slowly, carefully. Non-threatening, but unreadable.

"Someone who needs information," she said smoothly. "Someone who's willing to pay for it."

Reznik let out a nervous chuckle. "Lady, I don't know who you think I am, but I don't—"

"You do," she cut in. "And we both know it."

Reznik froze.

She read it instantly. The way his fingers twitched, the slight hitch in his breath—he was afraid.

Not of her.

Of who he was protecting.

She leaned in just slightly, lowering her voice. "I don't need to know everything. Just a location. One warehouse. One shipment. Then I'm gone."

Reznik licked his lips. "I don't know anything about—"

"Lying won't help you," she said softly.

He swallowed. His eyes darted to the door behind her. His body screamed flight.

Which meant she needed to push—just a little more.

She leaned in. "Who are you afraid of, Reznik? Because from where I'm standing, there are two outcomes here. You either help me, or the people you're protecting find out you've been caught in the middle. And tell me—" her voice dipped, just above a whisper, "—which one of those options scares you more?"

Reznik's breathing stuttered.

She had him.

Almost.

But then—

Something changed.

His gaze flicked past her.

And his entire body seized up.

A tremor rolled through his frame, like a man suddenly realising he was no longer in control of his own nightmare.

She knew.

She didn't have to turn around to know that Loki had stepped inside.

But she did.

And what she saw—

Was not Loki as he had been in the car.

Not Loki as he had been in the auction hall.

This was something else.

This was the creature that whispered in the dark corners of the universe.

The shadows that slithered between realms.

This was the thing that kings feared finding in their halls.

Reznik let out a shaky breath.

Loki said nothing.

Didn't move.

Didn't threaten.

And yet—

The room darkened.

Not by light. Not by flickering bulbs or some artificial failure.

But by something deeper.

The air itself seemed to compress.

A creeping, crawling thing slithered at the edges of thought—not heard, not seen, but felt.

Reznik’s eyes widened in pure, suffocating horror.

He grabbed the edge of his desk like it was the only thing keeping him tethered to reality.

Loki finally spoke.

"You will tell her what she needs to know."

No malice. No threat.

Just a statement.

Like the night itself had curled around his voice, wrapping into something cold and inevitable.

Reznik nodded rapidly.

Words spilling from his lips like water crashing over jagged rock.

"The—the warehouse—it's—Sector 14, outside the old shipyard—south dock storage! That's where they move the shipments! That's where the deals happen!"

Loki tilted his head slightly.

"See?" he murmured. "That wasn't so difficult."

Reznik's breath came in sharp, rapid bursts.

And then—he did something unexpected.

He started laughing.

Wild. Hysterical.

The kind of laughter that came when a man finally realised he was already broken.

"You—" Reznik choked on his own breath. "You're not real."

The Ranger stepped forward, pressing a calming hand against his shoulder, grounding him back into the moment. "You did the right thing," she said gently. "You don't need to be involved any further."

Reznik's eyes flicked to her, pleading.

"You don't get it," he whispered hoarsely. "He's watching."

Loki's expression remained impassive.

Phil, who had just stepped in from outside, frowned. "Who's watching?"

Reznik’s breath hitched. He clenched his fingers into his hair. "You don’t—you don’t understand!"

Phil crouched down, trying to steady the man, but it was too late.

Something inside Reznik had already broken.

His gaze flicked to Loki again, wider than before.

"You should never have come here," he whispered.

Phil tensed.

And deep inside, Loki finally understood.

This wasn’t about the warehouse.

This wasn’t about the shipment.

This was about something far, far worse.

Because Reznik wasn’t afraid of Loki.

He wasn’t even afraid of SHIELD.

He was afraid of something else.

Something bigger.

Something that watched from the shadows.

And Loki already knew the name that would come next.

Because he had heard the whispers before.

The Ranger exhaled, steadying Reznik as best she could. "Tell us," she murmured. "Who's watching?"

Reznik's hands trembled.

And then, barely above a breath—

"Mythos."

—

The car skidded to a halt in the shadows of the old shipyard, dust kicking up in thin clouds as the wheels crunched over gravel. The warehouse stood before them, a skeletal giant, metal siding rusting at the edges, the scent of salt and damp steel thick in the air.

Phil was out first, gun in hand, sweeping the area.

The Ranger moved next, silent, alert.

Loki?

Loki strolled, fingers adjusting the cuffs of his sleeves as if they weren't sprinting into what was most likely a trap.

The Ranger shot him a look.

Loki simply smirked. "Oh, do lighten up, darling. If they're still here, I'd hate to disappoint them by rushing."

Phil exhaled sharply, muttering something under his breath about "killing him myself" before gesturing them forward.

They moved inside.

The moment they stepped into the hollowed-out space, they knew.

They had just missed them.

Crates stood open, their contents half-emptied, as if someone had been in a hurry to clear out.

The floor was littered with discarded tech, relics, and artefacts—small things, forgotten things. As if whoever had been here had only taken what was necessary.

The Ranger crouched, fingers brushing over an ornate metal casing, still cool to the touch. "They weren't gone long. This place still feels…" She trailed off, her senses tingling.

"Occupied," Loki finished smoothly, eyes scanning the room.

Phil moved toward one of the abandoned crates, nudging it open with the barrel of his gun. Inside, various antiques and stolen tech lay in disarray—some broken, some intact.

But nothing valuable.

Nothing worth protecting.

Which meant—

"They knew we were coming," Phil muttered.

The Ranger exhaled. "Or they were already moving before we even knew to look."

Loki, who had been trailing fingers over the remains of an elegant wooden bureau, suddenly paused.

His expression shifted—not alarmed, but intrigued.

He ran a palm slowly along the surface, stopping just near a small, uneven gap in the wood.

A hidden compartment.

"How quaint," he murmured, pressing against the panel.

A soft click.

A piece of the wood shifted inward, revealing a small hollow.

And inside—

A folded slip of paper.

The Ranger reached for it immediately, unfolding the worn parchment, her eyes narrowing as she took in the handwritten symbols.

Numbers.

Sequences.

A code.

Phil moved beside her, peering over her shoulder. His brows furrowed, but after only a few seconds, his lips pressed into a thin line.

"I know this," he muttered.

The Ranger’s gaze flicked to him. "You recognise it?"

"Not the exact locations," he admitted. "But this format? This is an old SHIELD encryption. It was used in deep-cover intelligence drops before we switched to digital tracking. These numbers aren’t just random."

Loki leaned in slightly, tilting his head. "A location cipher, then?"

Phil nodded. "More than that. Coordinates. Three sets. Three locations."

Silence.

Loki exhaled a slow, amused breath. "How very theatrical."

The Ranger carefully folded the letter, tucking it into her pocket. "We won’t know what’s at these sites until we decode them back at the safe house."

Phil took another look around the empty warehouse, his stomach twisting slightly. "The question is—why leave this behind?"

Because whoever had cleared out of here had taken everything valuable.

Everything except this.

And that wasn’t a mistake.

That was a message.

The moment they returned, Phil and the Ranger wasted no time.

The letter was scanned, analysed, and run through SHIELD’s decryption database.

Numbers transformed into coordinates.

Three locations.

- One in Eastern Europe.
- One in South America.
- One in the Middle East.

Phil stared at the screen, fingers tapping against his chin. "This isn’t random. Whoever wrote this had access to old SHIELD protocols. That means they either used to work for us…"

The Ranger exhaled. "Or they’ve been studying us long enough to break the codes."

Loki, lounging in the background, sipped a glass of dark liquor, gaze flicking toward the screen. "Charming," he mused. "Three breadcrumbs, and not a single clue as to what lies at the end of each."

Phil shook his head. "We don’t know what’s at these locations. Could be another warehouse, could be something worse. But we need to move fast—before whoever was at that warehouse clears out these, too."

The Ranger sat back, exhaling slowly. "We split up?"

Phil hesitated. "I don’t like it, but we might have to. If we chase them one at a time, we could lose the trail entirely."

Loki, stretching lazily, smirked. "Oh, now this is getting interesting."

Phil shot him a glare. "It’s not a game, Loki."

Loki merely raised a brow, swirling his drink. "Isn’t it?"

The room fell into tense silence.

Because none of them—not even Loki—realised that the game had already begun.

That Mythos had set the board long before they had even stepped onto the playing field.

That every move they made—every location they chased.

Was already accounted for.

They were moving inside his design.

And none of them knew it.

Yet.

Phil leaned against the console of the safe house, staring at the decrypted coordinates one last time.

“Alright,” he muttered, tapping a finger against the screen. “We don’t have time to check these one at a time. We split up.”

Clint, who had been leaning casually against the wall, raised a brow. “Oh, so I get to go to the jungle alone while you two take Loki on a field trip?”

Phil shot him a dry look. “You’re the only one who speaks enough Spanish to get through South America without getting arrested.”

Clint grinned. “Fine. But if I step on a snake, I’m sending it to your office.”

“Noted,” Phil deadpanned before turning back to the others. “Loki, the Ranger, and I will take the Middle East location. There’s a SHIELD facility a few hours out—we’ll use a Quinjet to get there fast.”

The Ranger nodded. “Then we move before whoever left this message clears out the rest.”

Clint gave a lazy salute. “Enjoy your desert adventure. Try not to get sand in uncomfortable places.”

Loki, ever smug, smirked. “Oh, Barton. I do not experience discomfort.”

Clint just laughed, shaking his head as he turned to leave.

Phil sighed, rubbing his temple. “Alright. Wheels up in twenty minutes.”

And just like that, the chase was on.

The Quinjet landed well outside the main settlement, its sleek frame hidden in the deep desert shadows.

They had opted to walk the last stretch—both for discretion and necessity. The town they were heading toward wasn’t a place where SHIELD jets were welcome.

The terrain was brutal. Sand and jagged rock stretched for miles, the heat pressing against them like a living force.

Phil, who had never been a fan of dry, oppressive landscapes, exhaled through his nose. “This was a terrible idea.”

The Ranger adjusted the scarf around her face, shielding herself from the fine dust in the air. “Would you rather we took the Quinjet straight to the front door?”

Phil shot her a look. “I’d rather we take the Quinjet straight back to a nice air-conditioned SHIELD base.”

Loki, walking far too comfortably beside them, sighed. “Honestly, Coulson, it’s embarrassing how easily mortals complain.”

Phil glared at him. “We don’t all have magic frost-resistant blood, your Highness.”

Loki smirked. “No, I suppose you don’t.”

The Ranger, despite the heat, found herself grinning.

And then—finally—they saw it.

A larger town, nestled between the harsh dunes and a rocky cliffside. The contrast was almost surreal—a vibrant oasis in the middle of nothing.

And at its centre?

A bustling market unlike anything Phil had seen in years.

The moment they stepped into the heart of the marketplace, the senses were overwhelmed.

- The scent of spices filled the air—cinnamon, saffron, cardamom, and something deeper, richer, woven between the stalls.

- Stacks of fabrics and fine silks caught the sunlight, rippling like liquid gold and sapphire blue.

- Gemstones, dried herbs, exotic fruits—the sheer volume of trade was staggering.

The town was alive, a pulse of commerce and conversation.

And somewhere, buried in its maze of alleys and hidden corners, was their target.

Phil pulled out his secured SHIELD tablet, matching their coordinates to the map. “That’s the building.”

The Ranger followed his gaze—toward a nondescript structure near the far end of the market.

It looked unassuming. No signs, no flashing neon advertisements.

But the windows were covered.

Thick drapes blocked any chance of looking inside.

Someone wanted privacy.

“We can’t just stroll in,” Phil muttered. “Not without knowing what’s inside first.”

The Ranger nodded. “Let’s check the perimeter.”

They wove through the crowd, slipping down a quieter alley along the side of the building.

The moment they turned the corner, their suspicions were confirmed.

A heavily armoured door.

No signage. No markings. Just thick reinforced metal, secured with something that wasn’t just an average lock.

Phil ran a hand over it, frowning. “This isn’t normal. This is high-end security.”

The Ranger exhaled, stepping back. “Someone didn’t want anyone getting in… or something getting out.”

They exchanged glances.

This wasn’t just a black-market supply hub.

This was something else.

They retraced their steps, stepping back out into the busy street, blending into the crowd.

Phil was already strategising—considering how they might get through that impenetrable door—when he suddenly realised something.

Loki was gone.

Phil’s stomach dropped.

He turned sharply, scanning the crowd. “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me.”

The Ranger’s eyes flicked over the stalls, scanning for any trace of him.

Nothing.

Phil clenched his jaw. “Where the hell did he go?”

And then—

Just as effortlessly as he had vanished,

Loki reappeared.

Strolling out of the crowd, completely unbothered, expression unreadable.

Phil marched straight up to him. “Where the hell were you?”

Loki’s smirk was infuriatingly smug.

“Personal business.”

Phil’s eyes narrowed.

Loki’s expression gave away nothing.

But the Ranger…

She saw something.

Something small. Almost imperceptible.

A flicker of satisfaction. A ghost of a secret not yet spoken.

Loki had done something.

And whatever it was—

They weren’t going to find out until he wanted them to.

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the bustling marketplace as the three of them settled at a small café with a clear view of the mysterious building.

They had been watching for hours.

No one entered.

No one left.

Phil, arms crossed, exhaled sharply. “This isn’t normal. A place like that? Someone should have gone in or out by now.”

The Ranger sipped her tea, eyes still scanning the perimeter. “It could mean the place is empty.”

Loki, who had been reclining with effortless elegance, smirked. “Or it could mean whoever is inside doesn’t leave by conventional means.”

Phil shot him a look. “Then teleport in and check it out.”

Loki’s smirk barely faltered—but the shift in his posture was infinitesimal.

It was a rare tell.

One that only the Ranger caught.

“I cannot,” Loki said simply.

Phil’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean, cannot?”

Loki lifted his cup, taking an idle sip before responding with complete nonchalance.

“I mean precisely what I said.”

Phil’s patience thinned. “You’re telling me that after all the times you’ve popped in and out of places uninvited, now you can’t?”

Loki's expression remained impassive.

"Correct."

Phil exhaled sharply, dragging a hand over his face. "You are impossible."

Loki's smirk returned in full force. "Why, thank you, Agent Coulson."

Phil gritted his teeth.

The Ranger could see the barely restrained frustration rippling through him. But she also knew better than to push Loki on something he didn't want to explain.

At least, not here.

So she simply said, "We wait until nightfall. Then we go in unseen."

Phil let out a breath, still glaring at Loki. "Fine."

And with that, they booked themselves into a small, discreet hotel on the far side of the market.

The small inn was modest but comfortable.

Two rooms.

One for Phil.

And one for Loki and the Ranger.

Phil hadn't been thrilled about the arrangement, but considering Loki had already gotten under his skin enough for one day, he didn't argue.

Now, in the quiet of their shared room, the world outside was beginning to darken.

The sounds of the marketplace softened into murmurs, lanterns flickering in the streets below.

The Ranger was sitting near the window, absently fidgeting with her gloves, her mind running over every possibility for what lay behind that armoured door.

And then—

Loki stepped behind her, his presence warm, grounding.

"I have something for you," he murmured.

She turned, brow slightly raised.

Loki, for all his usual grandeur, didn't present it with fanfare.

He simply opened his palm.

And resting there, catching the dim candlelight, was a pendant.

She inhaled softly, fingers reaching out to trace the intricate craftsmanship.

The centrepiece was made of two green tourmalines, grown into each other. Their surfaces gleamed with a

depth of colour that seemed to shift between the deepest emerald and the faintest flickers of gold.

The crystals were held in place by elegant black and golden bands, woven like living roots, wrapping gently around the stones in an intricate dance.

It was stunning.

She looked up at him, her voice barely above a whisper. “Loki…”

He smiled—not his usual smirk, but something softer. Something real.

“I imbued the crystals with my magic,” he murmured, lifting the necklace gently. “It will help when you are in high-input environments—when the noise, the people, the sheer weight of the world becomes too much.”

Her chest tightened.

Because he understood.

He knew how much she processed unconsciously.

How much of the world filtered into her mind without her permission—the flickers of micro expressions, the energy of a room, the weight of a thousand unspoken words.

And this?

This wasn’t just a gift.

It was a promise.

A shield.

He stepped closer, reaching behind her to clasp the pendant around her neck.

His fingers grazed her skin, the warmth of his presence seeping into her like the slow burn of a fire on a cold night.

And then—

He pressed a gentle kiss against her shoulder.

A silent, lingering moment.

A whisper of intimacy without expectation.

She closed her eyes, exhaling deeply, overwhelmed—but not by the world this time.

By him.

By this.

By the fact that he had given her something no one else ever had.

Understanding.

She swallowed hard, her fingers brushing over the pendant. “I don’t know what to say.”

Loki tilted his head slightly, watching her with something close to reverence.

“Then say nothing,” he murmured. “Just know that you are never alone in this.”

She turned, meeting his gaze.

And for once, she let herself feel it.

Not just gratitude.

But the depth of what he had just given her.

Not just the pendant.

But himself.

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3 AM – The Infiltration Begins

The knock at Phil’s door was barely audible. Three light taps. Precise.

Phil opened it silently, already dressed, already prepared. No words were exchanged. Just a nod.

They slipped out of the small inn unseen, moving like shadows through the slumbering market town.

Or rather—the shadows moved with them.

The streets, usually awash with dim lamplight and the occasional glow of a late-night vendor, seemed darker than they should have been.

The alleyways? Deeper.

The air? Thicker.

Phil didn't have to ask.

He knew exactly who was responsible.

Loki, walking just behind the Ranger, wasn't even trying to hide it.

His magic coiled at the edges of the world around them—nothing overt, nothing obvious. Just enough to make them one with the night.

Phil gritted his teeth but said nothing.

If it kept them unseen, he wasn't going to complain.

Not yet.

They arrived at the armoured door without issue.

Phil moved first, his instincts sharp, his body language tense but controlled.

The Ranger followed, her gaze flicking toward the covered windows, the silent walls.

Loki watched them both, his expression unreadable.

Phil pulled out a SHIELD device—a sleek, compact gadget with silent, precision-based hacking technology.

No loud clicks.

No sparks.

Just a quiet hum as the locks disengaged.

With a final, almost imperceptible hiss, the door creaked open.

Phil stepped inside first.

The Ranger followed.

And the moment her foot crossed the threshold—

She froze.

A sharp inhale.

Something was wrong.

Her body reacted before her mind could—every sense screaming, every instinct snapping to attention.

Loki stepped in behind her—

And stilled.

Then, he understood.

His eyes narrowed.

The weight in the air, the strange, almost invisible pressure curling at the edges of the room—he knew what it was now.

A spell.

Not rare. Not impossible to break.

But effective.

And it had been woven into the walls, the very structure of the building itself.

That's why he couldn't sense it. Why he couldn't reach inside.

It had been shielded.

Not just from prying eyes, but from magic itself.

Loki exhaled through his nose, irritated.

"Clever," he murmured. "Crude, but clever."

Phil shot him a glance. "What?"

Loki's gaze swept the room, taking in what remained of whatever operation had been here.

"They knew what they were doing," Loki admitted. "Whoever secured this place didn't want people like me looking too closely."

Phil frowned, but the Ranger was already processing the implications.

"If they shielded this place from magic users," she said slowly, "then they weren't just protecting technology."

Loki nodded. "They were protecting knowledge."

The room itself was a hollowed-out husk of what must have once been a high-tech command centre.

- Cables strewn across the floor—disconnected, severed, or hastily removed.
- A few forgotten monitors, flickering with nothing but static.
- Wall mounts where high-end hardware had clearly once been installed.
- And in the centre of the room—a large, sleek table surrounded by three high-end gaming chairs.

Phil raised a brow. “At least they were comfortable.”

The Ranger ran a hand along the table, fingers brushing over faint imprints of where devices had once been placed.

Loki’s gaze flicked to the walls, noting the exact places where security measures had been stripped away.

“Whoever worked here,” the Ranger murmured, “wasn’t just handling stolen goods.”

Phil nodded. “This was a data centre. A hub.”

Loki hummed. “A nerve point in the network.”

But there were no clues left behind.

Nothing but emptiness.

The people who had been here had cleared out thoroughly.

All except for one thing.

Loki turned his head, listening.

And for the briefest of moments, he could still hear it.

A whisper of lingering magic.

A hand had touched this place long before them.

Someone was watching the players move.

And they had just made their presence known.

They stepped back into the alleyway, the night unnaturally still.

No new leads.

No evidence left behind.

Phil exhaled sharply, shaking his head. “Well, that was a waste of time.”

Loki tilted his head. “Was it?”

Phil glared at him. “We learned nothing. We came here for intel, and now we’re right back where we started.”

Loki merely smirked. “Then perhaps you weren’t looking properly.”

Phil clenched his fists, just barely restraining himself. “I swear, if you—”

The Ranger stepped between them, placing a firm hand on Phil’s shoulder.

“Phil,” she said, voice steady. “You need to trust us.”

Phil's jaw tightened.

He wanted to argue.

Wanted to remind her that Loki had never been someone to trust.

But he held his tongue.

Because she was right.

If this mission was going to work, if they were going to survive this, he had to start trusting Loki's instincts, whether he liked it or not.

He exhaled. "Fine."

Loki, looking far too pleased, simply lifted a hand.

A portal swirled into existence before them, crackling with energy.

Phil hesitated.

He still hated this method of travel.

The Ranger turned to him. "We step through together."

Phil exhaled through his nose. "You realize I still don't like this."

Loki smirked. "Oh, I know. That's precisely why I enjoy it."

The Ranger shot him a look, but before Phil could argue further, she took his hand—and stepped through first.

Phil had no choice but to follow.

The cold pull of the portal rushed over him—and in an instant, they were gone.

The moment they stepped out onto the desert sand, the familiar metal frame of the Quinjet stood before them, waiting.

Phil exhaled sharply.

He hated that. He hated all of that.

Loki stepped past him with ease, stretching his fingers as if shaking off the remnants of the spell in the building.

“Well,” he said, glancing between them. “That was disappointing.”

Phil turned to him. “Yeah? You’re telling me.”

Loki’s smirk didn’t fade, but his eyes gleamed with something else.

A flicker of realisation.

The Quinjet hummed through the air, cutting across continents in smooth, calculated efficiency.

Phil sat near the console, arms crossed, mind running over every possible angle.

The Ranger was across from him, deep in thought, turning over what they had found—or rather, what they hadn't.

And Loki?

Loki stood near the viewport, watching the clouds shift beneath them, fingers idly tracing the rim of a glass of amber-coloured liquor he had procured from… somewhere.

No one asked.

The air between them was thick with unspoken tension.

Finally, Phil broke the silence.

"This wasn't just a normal black-market operation," he muttered.

The Ranger exhaled. "No. Whoever this is… they were thinking way ahead."

Loki, still watching the sky, hummed. "Too far ahead."

Phil shot him a look. "You noticed it too."

Loki tilted his head slightly, the faintest flicker of irritation crossing his otherwise calm expression. "It is… aggravating."

Phil huffed a bitter laugh. "That's one way to put it."

Because whoever was running this, whoever Mythos was.

They had planned for everything.

This wasn't just about secrecy.

This was deliberate counterplay against people like Loki.

Against magic itself.

Phil leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "SHIELD has had plenty of dealings with people who try to keep us out. But this? We've never seen something like this before."

The Ranger nodded. "Even the best hackers leave something behind. A trace. A footprint. But this?" She shook her head. "This is like chasing a ghost."

Loki's grip tightened slightly on the glass in his hand.

Because this was more than that.

This wasn't just someone trying to cover their tracks.

This was someone standing two moves ahead of them at all times.

And he didn't like it.

Not one bit.

The Quinjet touched down in Bucharest just past midday, the city sprawling beneath them in a blend of old architecture and modern steel.

They made their way through the narrow streets toward the next set of coordinates.

But the moment they arrived—

Phil stopped dead in his tracks.

The Ranger cursed softly.

And Loki…?

Loki merely smiled.

Not out of amusement.

But because this had just gotten personal.

Because the building was gone.

Not abandoned.

Not emptied out.

Leveled.

The scent of dust and broken stone filled the air as heavy machinery still worked the site, bulldozers and cranes reducing whatever had once stood there to rubble.

Phil stared at the destruction, jaw clenched. “This place was standing a week ago.”

The Ranger scanned the area, eyes darting over the work crews, the demolished foundation. “They didn’t just clear out. They erased it.”

Loki watched quietly.

His mind was already working.

Because this wasn't just covering tracks anymore.

This was an intentional statement.

Phil took a slow breath. "We're done here."

The Ranger nodded. "Back to the Quinjet."

Loki lingered one second longer, gaze flicking over the site, over the small, remaining pieces of what had been.

And deep in the back of his mind, something whispered:

"What are you hiding, Mythos?"

The return flight was silent.

Each of them lost in thought.

The weight of three failed leads pressed heavily on them.

Every trace of Mythos' operation? Gone.

Every location? Emptied, shielded, or destroyed.

By the time the Quinjet landed back in the States, the sun was beginning to dip beyond the horizon, casting the familiar landscape in dusky gold.

They moved quickly, discreetly, back to the safe house where this mission had begun.

Phil dropped his gear onto the table, running a hand through his hair.

The Ranger exhaled sharply, rubbing her temples.

Loki?

Loki merely stood by the window, watching the sky fade from gold to deep blue.

Finally, Phil spoke.

“Alright. We need to rethink everything.”

Because right now?

Mythos was winning.

And they had nothing.

Not yet.

But soon.

Very soon.

The atmosphere in the control room was heavy with frustration. Three failed leads. No evidence. Mythos still ahead of them.

Phil leaned against the table, dialing Clint’s secured line.

The call connected after a few rings.

Clint's voice came through, slightly muffled by the sounds of the jungle in the background. "Tell me you found something, because I'm up to my knees in mosquitoes and bad decisions."

Phil exhaled. "No. Everything was wiped before we got there. But tell me you have something."

"Oh, I've got something," Clint said. "I managed to… persuade a guy to talk. He was working security for one of the past auctions."

Phil straightened. "And?"

"The next one is in London," Clint continued. "Two nights from now. High-profile buyers only. But there's someone else you need to talk to."

Phil frowned. "Who?"

"Some woman—she's the one arranging the locations," Clint said. "She's a ghost, keeps her hands clean, but she's the one picking the sites. If you want an invite, you have to get through her first."

Phil rubbed his temple. "Fantastic."

Clint smirked through the line. "Have fun with that."

The next day, the Quinjet touched down outside of London.

They moved quickly, discreetly.

Phil had already tracked their target—a woman known as Celeste Marlowe. Connected. Dangerous. Unreadable.

Their search led them to a bar exclusively for the rich and powerful.

Low lighting. Crystal glasses. Elegant music.

This wasn't a place where people asked questions.

This was a place where deals were made in whispers over expensive drinks.

And their target?

She was already there.

Seated at a lavish table near the back, dressed in deep emerald silk, exuding control and influence.

The Ranger and Phil approached first.

They tried.

They offered money.

They pressed.

Nothing.

Celeste merely smiled, her fingers tracing the rim of her wine glass. "I don't do business with people like you."

Phil leaned in. “People like us?”

She tilted her head. “People who don’t know how to play the game.”

And then—

She saw Loki.

Her entire demeanour shifted.

Eyes locked onto him.

Interest. Curiosity. Desire.

“Unless…” she murmured, eyes glinting. “Perhaps I might speak with someone who… understands.”

Phil gritted his teeth.

The Ranger’s stomach twisted.

Loki, ever the opportunist, simply smirked.

“I do so enjoy a good conversation,” he mused.

Celeste stood gracefully, turning toward the luxurious suites upstairs.

“Then let’s talk in private.”

Loki followed.

The Ranger and Phil waited in the bar.

The minutes dragged into two hours.

Phil was restless, swirling the last remnants of his drink. “If he’s getting an invite, fine. If he’s getting too cozy, I’m going up there.”

The Ranger didn’t answer.

Because something about this felt… wrong.

And then—

Loki returned.

Unruffled. Confident.

The usual self-assured gleam in his eye.

Phil gave him a pointed look. “Well?”

Loki smirked. “An old WW2 bunker in the English countryside. Tomorrow night.”

Phil huffed. “And I’m guessing you didn’t get that information by simply asking nicely.”

Loki tilted his head, smirk deepening.

“Darling, I always ask nicely.”

Phil muttered something under his breath, but he didn’t press. They had the location. That was all that mattered.

For now.

They retired to their hotel rooms, knowing the next evening would be critical.

The Ranger needed a moment to clear her mind, to reset.

The bath was warm, the steam curling around her as she let the tension melt away.

And then—

Her phone buzzed.

She frowned, reaching for it, water dripping from her fingers.

A message from an unknown number.

Her chest tightened.

She opened it.

A video.

She clicked play.

And watched.

And froze.

Loki.

Loki seducing Celeste.

The way he touched her. The way he leaned in, whispered against her skin, teased her like she was the only person in the world.

The way Celeste melted under his touch.

The way he looked like he was enjoying it.

Like he had done this not as a ploy.

But because he wanted to.

The air in the bathroom felt too heavy.

Her breath hitched.

A dull ache spread through her chest.

Loki.

What was he doing?

Did he enjoy it?

Because it sure looked like he did.

She swallowed hard, her grip on the phone tightening.

She felt shattered.

A deep, sinking weight settling in her stomach.

She wasn’t naive.

She knew who Loki was.

Knew what he was capable of.

But this?

This was different.

And the worst part?

She didn't know if she was more hurt, or if she was angry at herself for feeling this way.

She turned off the video.

And sat there, completely still.

Because she had no idea what to do next.

The water had gone cold.

She hadn't even noticed.

Not at first.

Not until the steam had faded, until the warmth had seeped from her skin, leaving only the dull ache of something unspoken in her chest.

She pulled the plug, watching the water spiral away, disappearing down the drain—just like whatever had been holding her together.

Then, slowly, she reached for the phone again.

She shouldn't.

She knew she shouldn't.

But her fingers moved on their own, her thumb hovering over the screen before tapping the message open once more.

And there it was.

Loki.

Loki touching Celeste.

Loki leaning in, whispering something just before his lips grazed her skin.

Loki smiling against her throat, teasing, coaxing, unraveling her inch by inch.

Celeste was helpless against him.

She had surrendered without hesitation.

And Loki?

Loki looked like he had done this a thousand times before.

Like it was effortless.

Like it was natural.

Like it was real.

A cold shudder ran through her.

She wanted to tell herself this was just another trick. Just a tactic.

But she had watched Loki closely for too long.

She knew his every glance, every smirk, every mask.

And she knew what she had seen in that video.

He had enjoyed it.

He had enjoyed every second.

She shut off the phone.

And for the first time in a long while—

She didn’t know how to face him.

She dressed for bed mechanically.

Movements precise. Unfeeling.

Like if she just went through the motions, she could forget the way her stomach felt hollow.

Like if she just focused on breathing, she wouldn’t feel the sharp, bitter edge of something dangerously close to pain.

She turned off the bathroom light and stepped into the bedroom.

And then—

Their eyes met.

Loki was already in bed, waiting for her.

But something in him stilled the moment he saw her.

Because there was something in her eyes he had never seen before.

Doubt.

And it was like a knife.

Not a blade to the chest.

But something worse.

Something slow, creeping, insidious.

Something that didn’t belong between them.

His breath caught in his throat, but he didn’t know what to say.

Didn’t know how to shape the words that would erase that look from her eyes.

So he said nothing.

And she said nothing.

She climbed into bed beside him.

But it was different.

The space between them felt wider than it should.

Loki lay on his back, staring at the ceiling.

She turned on her side, her back to him.

And for the first time since this whole mission had started.

Neither of them reached for the other.

Neither of them spoke.

Neither of them slept.

Both of them trapped in their own thoughts.

Both of them wondering if something between them had just changed forever.

Silence had never been something Loki feared.

He had lived in it. Breathed it. Thrived in it.

Silence had been his companion through centuries of schemes and betrayals. A blade he had wielded against those who sought to understand him. A shield to keep the world at bay.

But this silence?

The one stretching between him and the only person who had ever truly seen him?

This silence was suffocating.

He lay motionless, staring at the ceiling, but his mind was anything but still.

He had seen it. The moment it happened.

That flicker in her eyes.

That shift.

That doubt.

A doubt that had never been there before.

Not when the world stood against them.

Not when they had bled for each other.

Not when they had fought side by side, trusting each other without hesitation.

But it was there now.

Loki's fingers curled against the sheets, his chest tightening in a way that felt unnatural.

Wrong.

Why?

Why was she looking at him like that?

What had changed?

Had something happened between her and Phil? Had Coulson said something? Planted some seed of doubt in her mind?

His thoughts turned sharp, desperate.

No.

No, that wasn't it.

This wasn't about Phil.

This was about him.

About what she had seen.

Had she finally realised it?

That she was too good for him?

That she was too human to be tied to someone like him?

That despite everything—despite every whispered promise, every moment of warmth, every touch shared in the dead of night—

She could never truly trust him.

Because she still saw who he used to be.

Still saw the trickster, the liar, the villain.

And now, that doubt—that shattering, unbearable doubt.

Was tearing through him.

Was this it?

Was this how he lost her?

Not to death. Not to war.

But to something so much worse.

To the realisation that maybe she had never really been his at all.

That maybe—

She had only ever loved the idea of him.

And now that the illusion was breaking, so was she.

The sheets were soft against her skin, but she felt nothing.

Her breath came in slow, steady inhales. Measured. Controlled.

But her mind—

Her mind was a storm.

She had replayed the video too many times in her head.

The way Loki's fingers traced Celeste's skin. The way he leaned in, teasing, coaxing, playing the game as if it meant nothing.

Or worse—

As if it meant everything.

Why?

Why had he done it?

Did he not love her?

Or had she been foolish to believe he ever could?

Her throat felt tight, the weight in her chest growing heavier.

Was I just a pawn?

Loki was a god.

Time didn’t matter to him.

Was this all just a game to him? A long, well-crafted illusion where she had been nothing more than a carefully placed piece on his board?

Did she matter?

Or had she just been convenient?

Her fingers dug into the sheets.

Because she had trusted him.

With everything.

She had fought for him.

She had bled for him.

She had walked through fire for him—and she would do it again, without hesitation.

And he knew that.

He knew she would follow him anywhere.

And maybe—

Maybe that was why he kept her close.

Because she was useful.

Because she was his.

Because she trusted him blindly.

But what if she was wrong?

What if she had never truly seen him at all?

What if she had only seen what she wanted to believe?

The side of Loki that she hoped was real.

The Loki behind the masks.

The loving, caring man she wanted him to be.

But if that side of him had been a lie—

If this was the truth—

Then she had been a fool.

And worst of all?

A part of her still wanted to believe in him.

Still wanted to turn to him, ask for the truth, find the answer in his eyes.
But she didn't.

Because she wasn't sure if she could survive the answer.

So she stayed silent.

And let the distance grow.

Because for the first time since they had met—

She wasn't sure if Loki would reach for her first.

The first golden threads of morning light seeped through the hotel window, casting long shadows across the room.

Neither of them had slept.

Neither of them had spoken.

The silence had been suffocating.

A knock at the door shattered it.

The Ranger was on her feet instantly, moving toward it before Loki could even shift.

She pulled it open to find Phil standing there, already fully dressed, looking like he had been up for hours.

"Get ready," he said briskly. "It's a few hours' drive to the bunker, and I want to be there early."

His gaze flicked between them, taking in the stillness of the room, the tension thick enough to cut.

He didn't ask.

And the Ranger didn't explain.

She simply nodded, stepping back inside as Phil left them to prepare.

Loki lingered in bed, watching her as she moved about the room.

She wouldn't look at him.

Wouldn't speak to him.

Her fingers brushed against the pendant he had given her, the delicate green tourmalines cool against her skin.

She held onto it as though grounding herself.

As if she were reminding herself of something.

Or maybe, as if she were searching for an answer she didn't have.

Loki sat up slowly, watching her every movement with a piercing gaze.

She wasn’t angry.

She wasn’t distant in the way she was when she was upset with him.

This was different.

This was hesitation.

This was her pulling away from him without even realising it.

And it hurt.

It hurt in a way that he could not put into words.

Loki, the silver-tongued liar, the prince of deception, the god of stories—

Had no words for the ache clawing its way through his chest.

She had been his constant.

She had been his truth.

And now, she wouldn’t look at him.

He clenched his jaw, his mind spiralling.

What did Phil tell her?

What did he say to make her doubt?

But no—no, this wasn’t Phil’s doing.

This was something else.

Something she had seen.

Something she wasn't saying.

And it was tearing him apart.

The road stretched before them, winding through the English countryside in long, empty miles.

Phil drove, eyes focused on the path ahead.

The Ranger sat beside him, her posture relaxed but alert.

And they spoke—easily.

They bantered.

They talked through plans.

They laughed, even.

Loki sat in the back seat, watching.

Silent.

Still.

His fingers tapped idly against his knee, his mind a maelstrom of thoughts.

She had barely spoken to him since they left the hotel.

She hadn’t looked at him.

But now, with Phil, she spoke as if nothing was wrong.

It was a knife to the gut.

His jaw tensed.

The suspicion curled like poison in the back of his mind.

What did you tell her, Coulson?

But no—this wasn’t about Phil.

This was about her.

About the way she hadn’t reached for him last night.

About the way she kept the pendant in her grasp like she was trying to convince herself of something.

About the way she had looked at him—like she didn’t know if she could trust him anymore.

Loki turned his gaze toward the window, his own reflection staring back at him.

The trickster.

The liar.

The man she now doubted.

The man who might have just lost her—without even knowing how.

And that?

That was a fear he had never known before.

So he stayed silent.

And for the first time in his life—

Loki didn't know how to fix it.

The bunker loomed ahead, a relic of the past repurposed for the underbelly of the present.

Phil parked the car a fair distance away, out of sight from the gathering crowd of wealthy buyers and criminals alike. The sky above was beginning to fade into twilight, the last remnants of daylight clinging to the clouds like a dying ember.

He turned in his seat, facing them both.

"I've been ordered to secure any dangerous weapons or artefacts that show up in the auction," Phil stated plainly. "Loki, you're here to identify which items are a threat. If something is too dangerous to be sold into private hands, we take it."

Loki inclined his head, his usual smirk absent. "Understood."

Phil's gaze flicked between them, taking them in.

The silence. The way neither of them looked at each other.

Something was off.

Phil wasn't blind—he could read tension when he saw it. But now was not the time to address it.

So instead, he said, "You're going in as a couple again. I'll be your security."

The Ranger nodded once.

Loki simply exhaled through his nose, extending his hand toward her.

A gesture they had done before. A simple movement.

But this time—

She hesitated.

Not long.

Not enough for anyone else to notice.

But Loki noticed.

The brief flicker of uncertainty in her eyes, the way her fingers curled slightly before she forced herself to take his hand.

Before they both slipped into the roles they were supposed to play.

The bunker-turned-luxury-auction-hall was nearly identical to the first one they had infiltrated—elegant, exclusive, and steeped in the kind of wealth that came from exploitation rather than hard work.

The crowd?

Mostly the same.

A few new faces, some shifting power dynamics.

But at its core, it was the same den of vipers.

The Ranger's senses kicked in instantly.

Scanning the crowd.

Watching body language.

Picking up on intentions, connections, hidden tells.

It should have been exhausting.

It should have been draining, overwhelming.

But it wasn't.

For the first time, it was easier.

Her mind wasn't being pulled in a hundred directions. The flood of external information wasn't suffocating her.

It was clear.

It was calm.

Her fingers drifted to the pendant, tracing the intricate black and gold bands wrapped around the twin tourmalines.

The moment her fingertips brushed the cool crystal, she felt it.

The soft, whispering essence of Loki.

Not words. Not a command.

Just… a presence.

A steady, silent force keeping her mind grounded.

Loki saw her do it.

He saw the way her body eased, the way her shoulders didn't hold as much tension.

And he said nothing.

But inside, he felt the smallest flicker of relief.

The gift was working.

It was helping her.

And yet—

Would it be enough?

Would it be enough to bring back the trust he felt slipping through his fingers?

Would it be enough to make her look at him the way she used to?

He didn’t know.

And that uncertainty unsettled him more than he wanted to admit.

She felt the difference immediately.

The lack of strain. The way her mind felt clearer.

Loki’s gift was working.

And it wasn’t just a tool.

It wasn’t just a gesture of convenience.

She knew him.

She knew how Loki operated.

He never did anything without purpose.

So why?

Why give her something like this?

Something so deeply personal.

Something imbued with his own magic, his own essence.

Was it simply a token of protection?

Or was it something more?

She didn't know.

And she didn't ask.

Because she didn't know how.

Not anymore.

Not when she wasn't even sure what was real between them.

Not when the doubt still sat heavily in her chest, suffocating her.

She inhaled slowly, pushing the thoughts down, down, down.

This wasn't the time.

Not here.

Not now.

So she slipped fully into her role, a poised, graceful force at Loki's side, as the auctioneer took the stage.

And the night began.

Loki and the Ranger stood together, a picture of effortless power and wealth. They belonged here. Or at least, that's what they made the others believe.

The auctioneer—a man with a smooth voice and a well-practiced air of control—stepped forward onto the small elevated platform at the front of the bunker.

“Welcome, ladies and gentlemen,” he purred, “to another exclusive night of rare and unparalleled acquisitions.”

The crowd murmured in quiet excitement, glasses of aged whiskey and expensive champagne raised in anticipation.

Phil stood further back, positioned strategically, eyes scanning for threats, ears tuned to Loki’s every subtle tell.

And then…

The first item was brought forward.

A velvet-draped tray was presented on a pedestal, and as the cloth was lifted, an iridescent sphere the size of a grapefruit was revealed.

It glowed softly, pulsating with an eerie green-blue light, its surface almost liquid, shifting subtly like something alive.

Loki’s entire posture stiffened.

The Ranger, feeling the change in him, barely shifted her expression—but her fingers pressed subtly against his palm in silent question.

Loki’s jaw tensed just slightly before he leaned in and whispered, “Gamma energy.”

She nearly flinched.

Phil, listening through the discreet comm, let out a low curse.

Gamma energy was never a good thing.

The auctioneer smiled knowingly. “Our first item tonight—a relic of the stars. This artefact was extracted from a crashed vessel of unknown origin, emitting an energy signature that scientists still struggle to define. A fascinating piece of alien technology.”

Loki’s expression remained controlled, but the Ranger knew better.

It’s more than that.

Loki’s magic flickered through his fingertips, subtly analysing the energy rippling from the sphere.

He could feel it.

Not just gamma radiation, but something older. Something twisted.

“This,” Loki murmured, keeping his voice low so that only the Ranger could hear, “is not a mere artefact. It is a power core. Designed to sustain itself indefinitely—until tampered with.”

The Ranger’s stomach dropped.

If someone experiments with it…

Loki nodded subtly, as if reading her thoughts.

“It would be most… catastrophic.”

“Shall we start the bidding?” the auctioneer announced smoothly.

The opening bid was placed at two million dollars.

A man in a sharply tailored silver suit raised his hand.

Then a woman in deep red, her nails lacquered black, followed.

The price climbed.

Four million.

Six.

Nine.

Loki remained perfectly still, his gaze flicking from one bidder to the next.

The Ranger did the same, reading every micro expression, every hidden motive.

And then—

A voice cut through the crowd.

“I offer twenty million.”

Silence.

Heads turned.

Loki's eyes darkened.

A man in military fatigues, his hands scarred, his presence radiating the cold calculation of someone who had led too many battles and lost too little.

The Ranger didn't need to read him to know.

A warlord.

A man who had no interest in collecting rare items for display.

He wanted the core for something far worse.

Loki exhaled slowly through his nose.

He turned his head just slightly, whispering to the Ranger, "We cannot let him leave with it."

The Ranger didn't argue.

Her gaze flicked toward Phil, who was already preparing a move to intercept.

But before anything else could happen—

The second item was brought forward.

The bidding on the Gamma Core had not yet ended, but the auctioneer wasted no time in unveiling the next piece.

Another pedestal.

Another draped cloth.

And beneath it—

A small, sleek metal casing, no bigger than a handheld device.

It looked unassuming.

But Loki stiffened again.

Because he could feel it.

The pulse of energy contained inside.

And he knew exactly what it was.

The auctioneer's voice was calm, controlled. "This, dear guests, is an object of true rarity."

"The device you see before you was retrieved from a battlefield long forgotten. Its origins? Unknown. Its purpose? A mystery. But one thing is certain—it is power in its purest form."

Loki's fingers twitched slightly.

The Ranger's voice was barely a whisper. "What is it?"

Loki's lips barely moved. "A decaying power cell."

Phil's voice cut through the comm. "Explain."

Loki didn't need to be told twice.

"This device contains a self-sustaining energy supply. When depleted, it does not simply lose function. It has a failsafe mechanism."

The Ranger's heart skipped a beat. "What kind of failsafe?"

Loki's voice was calm. Controlled. Deadly.

"The kind that will erase everything alive within a continent."

Silence.

The auctioneer continued his presentation, unaware of the horror that sat before them.

The bidding for the power cell began.

It started small.

One million.

Two.

Five.

But this time—

The warlord stayed silent.

Instead—

Another man placed a bid.

A scientist.

One whose work had been redacted from every intelligence file Phil had ever read.

A man whose mere presence made Loki's fingers itch with the urge to put a blade through his throat.

He placed a bid of ten million.

Then fifteen.

Then twenty.

Phil's voice came through the comm. "We need to end this. Now."

The Ranger's hands were steady, but her pulse was racing.

Loki, ever composed, watched. Calculated. Waited.

Because this was no longer just a bidding war.

This was a game of who would leave this room alive.

And if Loki had any say in it—

Neither of these men would.

As the bidding wars intensified, the tension in the bunker became palpable—thick enough to strangle every breath.

Loki's gaze flicked to the Ranger's.

For just a heartbeat, their eyes met.

In that brief exchange, an entire conversation took place —silent, profound, undeniable.

Both knew exactly what needed to happen next.

The Ranger would target one bidder, subtly forcing him to withdraw, while Loki ensured the other item ended up safely in their own hands.

It was a delicate dance they had mastered.

But tonight—tonight it was something else.

Tonight, it was a risk.

A trust that felt fragile.

But they had no choice.

The Ranger, holding Loki's gaze for a second longer, gave an almost imperceptible nod.

Loki's lips barely curved upward—a silent acknowledgement.

Then, both slipped into their roles.

The Ranger moved gracefully, her gaze shifting subtly toward the warlord.

He was a seasoned soldier, alert and vigilant. But she could see through him—through his carefully constructed exterior, through the brutal reputation he carried.

He was watching the bidding closely, confident and unchallenged.

She stepped toward him quietly, her presence subtle yet commanding. As she came near, the warlord glanced at her, momentarily distracted by her unexpected approach.

His eyes met hers, dark and calculating.

“You’re making quite the statement tonight,” she murmured smoothly, her voice carrying just the right balance of admiration and intrigue. “You must be confident in your resources.”

The warlord’s mouth twitched slightly. “I don’t enter battles I can’t win.”

She tilted her head, eyes sharpening ever so slightly, a knowing smile forming. “But do you truly understand what you’re buying?”

His eyes narrowed, suspicious. “Explain yourself.”

She leaned in subtly, dropping her voice lower, her words resonating with calm intensity. “That core emits gamma energy. You think you can control it. Harness it. But can you protect your men from it? Can you protect yourself?”

The warlord stared at her, unmoving, eyes cold. “You seem to know much.”

“I do,” she replied calmly, letting silence stretch between them. “Enough to know that the last man who tried to harness gamma energy saw his army melt away before his eyes—quite literally. Painful, slow, and irreversible.”

He blinked. Just once. But she saw it—the seed of doubt taking root.

She pushed further.

“You’re powerful,” she said softly. “But are you prepared for that?”

He held her gaze, uncertainty flickering behind his icy composure.

And then, slowly, he turned back to the auctioneer, the muscles in his jaw tight. When the auctioneer called for the next bid, the warlord’s hand remained motionless at his side.

He’d withdrawn.

She’d done it.

Across the room, Loki watched the Ranger’s subtle triumph from the corner of his eye, admiration and relief mingling together inside him.

Now it was his turn.

He turned his attention fully to the scientist who had fixated obsessively on the small, deadly power cell.

Loki knew his kind all too well. The arrogance, the insatiable hunger for knowledge—regardless of the cost.

Stepping forward, Loki raised a hand with elegant nonchalance.

“Twenty-five million,” he declared effortlessly, silencing the room instantly.

The scientist’s eyes snapped toward him, annoyed at the sudden competition. “Thirty,” the scientist countered harshly.

Loki smiled slowly, dangerously. “Forty.”

The scientist stiffened visibly, jaw clenched. “Forty-five.”

Loki’s eyes flashed, his smile growing sharper, crueler. “Sixty million.”

Gasps echoed through the crowd. This was no longer a bidding war—it was a power play.

The scientist hesitated, visibly frustrated. “Sixty-five.”

Loki lifted a single eyebrow, his voice utterly composed, taunting. “Eighty million.”

The scientist’s face paled, realising he’d stumbled into a fight he couldn’t win. He stared at Loki, calculating desperately, before shaking his head once, sharply, and lowering his gaze in defeat.

The auctioneer glanced at Loki, astonished but delighted. “Sold, for eighty million dollars.”

Loki merely inclined his head, victorious.

The item was theirs.

The Ranger quietly returned to Loki's side, their roles merging seamlessly back into place. Their fingers brushed, a silent acknowledgment of their shared success.

Yet the Ranger withdrew just slightly, maintaining that fragile distance between them.

Loki felt it deeply—her warmth so close, yet so far. His heart twisted at the continued hesitation in her touch.

His mind raced, wondering what it would take to heal the fracture that had opened between them.

But for now, they had secured both dangerous items. The immediate danger was averted.

Phil's voice came calmly through the comm. "Items secured?"

Loki responded softly, "Indeed."

"Then let's get them out safely," Phil instructed. "No complications."

The Ranger nodded to herself, the weight of the mission pushing aside, for now, the ache she felt deep inside. "Agreed. We leave now."

Loki followed her lead, his mask back in place, flawlessly composed, while inside, something ached sharply at the unresolved tension lingering between them.
The drive back to the hotel was heavy with silence.

Phil cast careful glances toward Loki and the Ranger in the rear-view mirror, the tension radiating from the backseat was impossible to miss.

Loki stared quietly out the window, expression closed, unreadable. The Ranger sat rigid, her gaze firmly fixed ahead, avoiding any accidental contact with Loki's eyes.

Something had changed drastically between them, and Phil could feel it. He just didn't yet understand why.

Once in their room, Loki and the Ranger moved around each other carefully, as if each were afraid the other would shatter with a wrong word or look. The room was filled with unspoken words, questions hanging painfully unanswered.

She retreated quietly to the bathroom, shutting the door gently behind her. Loki watched her go, his heart aching but unable to find the courage to follow.

Inside the small sanctuary of the bathroom, she felt her resolve crumble. She reached for her phone again, her fingers trembling slightly as she opened the video once more.

The scene played out again—painfully, unavoidably.

Loki, seductive. Celeste, yielding completely.

Her heart tightened, eyes blurring with tears she refused to let fall. She pressed her palm over her mouth, suppressing the sharp breath of pain that threatened to escape.

She had to know. Had to make sense of this.

And she couldn't carry it alone anymore.

She hesitated only briefly before tapping the phone's screen, selecting Phil's contact.

She pressed send.

Then she quickly forwarded the same message, with shaking hands, to Scarlett.

Scarlett would understand. She would know how to make sense of it—or at least she hoped.

She placed the phone down and steadied herself, breathing deeply, trying desperately to regain control.

Phil's phone buzzed softly in his room, where he sat reviewing the night's mission notes. He frowned slightly as he saw the message from the Ranger—unexpected at this late hour.

Opening it, he froze.

His jaw tightened, and a sense of cold certainty filled his gut.

There was Loki—exactly as Phil had always expected. Manipulative, cold, calculating.

The Ranger had clearly seen it too.

Phil's fingers curled around the phone, feeling anger rise. Not just for what he saw Loki doing, but for the pain he knew this was causing the Ranger. She was strong, resilient, but this betrayal—real or perceived—could shatter even the toughest resolve.

He sighed heavily. Loki had always been a risk, a liability.

This just confirmed everything he feared.

In another part of the world, Scarlett opened her message and frowned deeply at the unexpected video. She watched it carefully, eyes narrowed, disbelief turning quickly to suspicion.

She knew Loki—knew the depth of his bond with the Ranger. This felt wrong. Something didn't match.

Scarlett tapped her screen decisively, calling up her extensive contacts, digging into surveillance footage, communications, everything available to her.

She wouldn't stop until she uncovered the truth, one way or another.

But for now, the Ranger would have to wait, trapped in uncertainty.

The Ranger finally emerged from the bathroom, carefully composing herself, but avoiding Loki's gaze once more.

He stood quietly by the window, the city lights reflecting in his eyes, illuminating nothing of what he felt within.

Both wanted desperately to speak, but neither knew how.

So they lay in silence once again—painfully aware of the distance growing ever wider between them.

They boarded the Quinjet silently, the tension between them thicker now, woven into every breath, every movement. Phil settled himself at the controls, plotting the course back to the States.

Just before takeoff, Phil's comm buzzed urgently. Clint's voice crackled through the line. "New intel. Mythos is setting up a facility in New York. Something big. Could be our best chance."

Phil's eyes hardened. "Copy that. We're on our way."

He glanced briefly toward Loki, who had taken his place in the far corner, distant and quiet, before turning to the Ranger. "We need to talk," he said quietly. "Privately."

She nodded slowly, her stomach tightening with dread.

When the Quinjet was stable in the air, Phil stood, indicating for her to follow him toward the rear compartment, away from Loki's watchful gaze.

The door closed quietly behind them, leaving only the steady hum of engines and the thrum of anxiety between them.

Phil didn't waste any time. "That video," he said, voice tense, quiet. "When did you get it?"

“Last night,” she answered softly, unable to meet his eyes. “From an unknown number. I… I don’t know who sent it.”

Phil exhaled sharply, shaking his head. “You’ve watched it, haven’t you?”

She nodded slowly. “Yes.”

His expression hardened. “Then you know what it means. He’s using you. He’s playing you—like he plays everyone else.”

She swallowed painfully, her fingers unconsciously curling around the pendant Loki had given her. “Phil… I’m not sure what to believe anymore.”

Phil stepped closer, lowering his voice, anger edging every word. “You’ve seen what he’s capable of. You’ve seen the video. He didn’t just get information. He enjoyed every damn second of it.”

Her throat tightened, eyes burning with unshed tears. “Maybe he had to—”

“No.” Phil’s voice was sharp, firm. “You know better than that. Loki has always played everyone. Me. SHIELD. You. You’re better than this. You’re smarter.”

She swallowed painfully. “But…”

“But nothing.” Phil’s eyes narrowed, his anger seeping into his tone. “You’re letting your feelings blind you. He’s using that against you—against all of us. He’s a liar. Always has been. Always will be.”

Her heart clenched painfully. “You don’t know him like I do.”

Phil sighed bitterly. “That’s the problem. Maybe you never knew him at all.”

She flinched visibly.

Phil softened slightly, realising the depth of his words. “Look. Just… be careful. He’s dangerous. And I don’t want to see you hurt any more than you already have been.”

She nodded slowly, wiping away a stray tear that finally fell. “I know.”

Phil laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “I’m here if you need anything.”

Then he returned to the cockpit, leaving her standing there, feeling more alone than ever before.

Loki sat silently, eyes fixed out the Quinjet window. He’d seen them talking, watched the emotions ripple across their faces.

Phil’s anger was obvious, expected. Loki had no illusions about that.

But it was her pain that tore him apart. He’d sensed it—the sharp edge in the way she carried herself, the subtle tremble in her hands. He knew she had seen something. Something that made her doubt him completely.

Every look, every hesitation was a dagger plunged deep into his heart.

Did she think he would betray her?

Did she believe he would hurt her, toy with her as he had so many others?

He swallowed the painful lump in his throat. He didn't know how to fix this. Didn't know how to reach out, or if he even had the right to anymore.

He glanced at her, hoping she might meet his gaze.

But she didn't.

She sat as far away from him as possible, staring blankly at nothing, her fingers tracing the pendant he'd given her. The gift he'd meant as proof of his love, his devotion—now a painful reminder of what they had once shared.

Loki's breath caught.

He'd fought wars, survived torture, outwitted death itself…

But nothing had ever hurt him as deeply as the uncertainty he now saw in her eyes.

He couldn't lose her.

But he didn't know how to hold onto her, how to prove to her the truth—that he'd never loved anyone as fiercely or as honestly as he loved her.

And now he was helpless, caught in the web of mistrust and doubt he himself had helped create.

Nightfall had settled across the city as the Quinjet touched down discreetly outside New York. Phil drove quickly through the gleaming streets, toward a high-tech industrial estate—home to sleek offices and billion-dollar tech giants.

The intel Clint had sent pointed clearly here.

Mythos' new facility had to be hiding among these polished glass buildings—impressive, pristine, and outwardly unassuming.

Phil parked the car in shadows a few blocks away, and they moved swiftly and quietly through the darkening streets toward the target building. Its modern, reflective glass façade gleamed softly under the streetlights, hiding any hint of secrets lurking behind it.

The three wove carefully through narrow alleys between the sleek, futuristic buildings. Shadows pooled thickly around them, casting eerie reflections across mirrored windows.

Suddenly, without warning, Loki disappeared.

Phil froze instantly, turning sharply, tension flooding his expression. "Damn it," he muttered. "Where is he going now?"

The Ranger's stomach tightened in sudden worry. "I don't know," she said quietly, her voice strained.

Phil exchanged a quick glance with her. “We have to keep moving—but watch your back.”

She nodded, but anxiety gripped her. Where had Loki gone? And why now?

A brief flash of reflected light had caught Loki’s eye—something so subtle neither Phil nor the Ranger had noticed. He had felt it more than seen it, a flicker out of place, too calculated to be innocent.

Instantly, he teleported into the shadowed alley from where it had originated.

Loki materialised silently, daggers already in hand. In front of him stood a figure dressed in a NYPD uniform. For a heartbeat, Loki hesitated—but only a heartbeat.

He saw the weapon aimed carefully, precisely at the Ranger’s back. And he understood immediately.

This was no police officer. This was an assassin, carefully positioned, disguised, and ready to take a lethal shot at the Ranger.

Loki moved without hesitation. Before the assassin could pull the trigger, Loki stepped directly into his line of sight, eyes glinting with fury, blades flashing.

The assassin’s eyes widened in shock, but it was too late.

Loki's daggers plunged cleanly into his chest, quick and efficient, piercing straight through the assassin's heart.

The killer fell silently, eyes wide in disbelief, collapsing into the shadows of the alley. Loki stared down coldly, feeling no remorse—only a burning, protective rage.

No one harmed his Ranger.

Not even now, when she could barely bring herself to look at him.

He exhaled sharply, withdrawing his blades, wiping them clean, and allowing himself just a brief moment to regain control.

Then he teleported back silently, rejoining the others.

Loki reappeared silently beside the Ranger and Phil, startling them both.

Phil spun sharply. "Where the hell did you go?"

Loki's expression revealed nothing. "Investigating. I found nothing of importance."

Phil eyed him suspiciously, clearly not believing it, but said nothing further. The Ranger watched Loki quietly, sensing something hidden beneath his careful neutrality, but again—she didn't speak.

Together, they approached the sleek office building, moving silently inside. They searched room after room,

sleek corridors illuminated softly by automated lights, all pristine and sterile, devoid of anything suspicious.

Again—nothing.

No evidence. No leads. Just more empty spaces. It was becoming a bitter pattern.

Phil sighed deeply, frustrated, running a hand roughly through his hair. “Another dead end.”

Loki said nothing, merely studying the emptiness with narrowed eyes. His mind raced—he knew they were being manipulated. Mythos was toying with them, leading them into traps and empty spaces, wasting their time and energy.

The Ranger stood silently, eyes distant, clearly exhausted. Loki longed to reach for her, to comfort her—but he held himself back, knowing the doubt in her eyes had not faded.

They arrived at the safe house well after midnight, the city now blanketed in darkness, its familiar skyline offering no comfort—only more shadows, more unanswered questions.

Loki said nothing, immediately retreating to the window, silently watching the city lights below.

The Ranger moved quietly to the far side of the room, keeping a careful distance. Phil glanced between the two, concern deepening into suspicion, sensing something had fractured irreparably.

Before Phil could speak, his phone buzzed insistently. He reached for it, noticing Clint's caller ID flashing. A cold sense of dread tightened around his chest.

He answered quickly. "Barton?"

"Phil, you need to see this. Now."

Phil's phone pinged immediately—a video arriving. He quickly opened it, holding his breath.

The screen filled with grainy, shaky footage from a police bodycam. A New York City street. An officer speaking calmly into his radio: "I'm checking some suspicious activity down this alley—stand by."

Phil's pulse quickened. He knew that alley. It was the one they had just left.

Then—

Loki appeared suddenly, his blades flashing in the dim light. Phil watched, stunned, as Loki swiftly, coldly plunged his dagger into the officer's chest.

The officer collapsed silently to the ground.

Dead.

Loki stepped back, expression emotionless, before vanishing into the darkness.

The video stopped abruptly, leaving Phil staring blankly at the screen, pulse hammering, disbelief warring with fury.

Phil slammed his phone down onto the table, his voice harsh and filled with rage. “You killed a cop!”

Loki turned slowly, face impassive, barely registering Phil’s anger. “You misunderstand the situation.”

Phil took a sharp step forward, barely restraining himself. “Misunderstand? I just watched you murder a police officer in cold blood. Explain yourself!”

The Ranger froze, heart pounding, eyes widening in shock. “Phil, what are you talking about?”

“Ask your boyfriend,” Phil snapped, pointing angrily toward Loki. “Or don’t. He’ll just lie again.”

Loki’s expression hardened, his gaze meeting Phil’s fury without wavering. “It was not what it appeared to be.”

Phil’s eyes flashed. “I saw it with my own eyes! He was just doing his job! He posed no threat to you.”

Loki’s jaw tightened, but he said nothing more. He knew the truth—but how could he prove it now?

Phil turned to the Ranger, desperate to reach her. “Do you see now? Do you finally see him for what he really is? He’s a murderer.”

The Ranger was pale, frozen between them, unable to speak, unable to process. She had trusted Loki implicitly—but now, seeing Phil’s conviction, hearing his accusation, she felt even more uncertain.

Loki glanced toward her, and in his eyes was a quiet plea—desperate, wounded, yet too proud to speak the words.

But she looked away. Unable, unwilling to meet his gaze.

And it cut deeper than any blade ever could.

Phil shook his head bitterly, stepping back. “Fury will hear about this. You’re done, Loki.”

He turned abruptly, storming from the room, leaving them alone.

The silence stretched painfully between them.

She turned away, hands shaking as she touched the pendant Loki had given her—the gift that whispered his essence, offered her grounding and calmness. But what use was it now, when her trust was crumbling?

Loki’s voice was quiet—almost broken. “You think me a monster.”

She didn’t answer immediately, her breath hitching painfully. “I don’t know what to think anymore.”

He moved closer, hesitant, uncertain. “You know me. Better than anyone. Do you truly believe I would kill without reason?”

She wanted to believe him. Wanted desperately to trust him again. But the video of him seducing Celeste, coupled with this new horror… it was too much.

“Then why?” she whispered painfully. “Give me something, Loki. Give me a reason.”

He hesitated, something flickering behind his careful mask—fear, vulnerability. “I can’t—not yet.”

She turned away sharply, eyes burning. “Then neither can I.”

The silence between them stretched painfully.

Loki stood perfectly still, watching her turn her back to him, feeling her rejection like a physical blow. He had protected her—he had saved her life—but the cost had been far higher than he anticipated.

And now, the one person who had seen beyond every mask, every deception, was slipping away.

He had killed to protect her, and now it might cost him everything he loved.

Yet he remained silent. Because there was a truth hidden deep beneath all of this, something far more sinister, far more dangerous. Something he feared would destroy her if he revealed it too soon.

But silence was now his enemy.

And it was winning.

Phil sat in the quiet darkness of his room, his anger and frustration barely contained. The tension of the evening still burned hotly inside him, Loki’s face haunting him—a constant reminder of all the pain and betrayal Loki had brought into their lives.

Then, his phone buzzed sharply, breaking his grim thoughts. Phil glanced down, eyes narrowing at the incoming message:

FROM: Director Fury
Message: Coulson, new orders. Bring Loki and the Ranger to the secure containment facility immediately. Loki is to be detained until further notice. Keep the Ranger close—she may need protection.

Phil exhaled deeply, relief washing over him. Finally, Fury was acting. Finally, SHIELD was seeing sense. Loki would be contained, and Phil could ensure the Ranger's safety. He quickly typed a brief acknowledgment:

Copy. On our way.

Morning came grey and heavy, tension clouding the air as they drove in silence through the outskirts of New York. Loki sat quietly in the backseat, watching the landscape slip by with unreadable eyes. The Ranger, silent and distant, stared ahead, lost in painful thoughts.

Phil's jaw was tight, resolve hardening with every mile. They trusted him—well, she trusted him—and Phil felt a pang of guilt for deceiving her. But Loki had forced his hand. He had given Phil no choice.

They arrived at a run-down industrial estate far from the city, buildings rusted and forgotten, shadows thickening under the cloud-heavy sky.

Phil parked the car, exiting quickly, his expression grimly determined.

“This is it,” he announced. “Clint’s intel pointed to this warehouse as another one of Mythos’ facilities. Stay alert.”

The Ranger glanced around uncertainly. Something felt wrong, out of place. “Phil, are you sure about this?”

He nodded firmly, hiding his unease. “Orders are orders. Stay sharp.”

Loki stepped out silently, eyes narrowed in suspicion. But he said nothing, quietly assessing the surroundings. He could sense something amiss, but held back, wary and tense.

Meanwhile.

Across the city, Natasha sat in a dimly lit tech lab deep within a secure SHIELD facility. Her eyes fixed intensely on the screen as the young technician beside her painstakingly dissected the now-infamous video.

“There,” the tech muttered, pointing at the digital image. “It’s almost invisible—but look closely here. See those compression artefacts? That’s high-level digital tampering. Whoever altered this footage is seriously skilled.”

Natasha’s pulse quickened, her instincts confirmed. “How good?”

He turned to her, eyes serious. “Whoever did this knew exactly how to fool our systems. I mean, we’re talking government-level skill—maybe higher.”

Natasha leaned back slowly, realisation flooding her. “Mythos.”

The tech nodded grimly. “If I had to guess—yeah. Or someone working very closely with him.”

Natasha reached for her phone immediately, fingers poised over the keys. Her message was swift, clear, urgent:

To: The Ranger
Message: We’ve uncovered something critical about the video. It’s not what it seems. Don’t trust—

She paused, thumb hovering uncertainly above the send button. Natasha hesitated, thinking deeply, calculating carefully—because right now, trust was a dangerous weapon, and one wrong move could shatter everything.

For now, the cursor blinked silently—message unsent, uncertainty lingering.

Outside the old warehouse, the trio stood cautiously, senses on high alert.

Phil’s pulse quickened, realising how easily the situation could spiral. He steadied himself, hand gripping his weapon tightly.

The Ranger glanced back at Loki—something in his posture told her he felt it too: the whisper of danger, the subtle wrongness in the air.

She hesitated, fingers brushing again against the pendant Loki had given her, seeking clarity, strength, answers she still couldn't find.

Phil moved ahead sharply, motioning for them to follow. "Stay close. Let's move in."

Inside, shadows swallowed them whole, thick and suffocating. Their footsteps echoed through the emptiness, dust swirling in faint beams of light.

But the warehouse held nothing—just emptiness and silence, another mocking echo of Mythos' games.

Then Phil's comm crackled suddenly, breaking the quiet. "Agent Coulson, containment ready."

The Ranger turned sharply, eyes widening. "Containment?"

Loki stiffened immediately, gaze sharpening. "What is this?"

Phil lifted his weapon slowly, eyes hard and cold. "Director Fury's orders. Loki—you're under arrest."

Loki's expression hardened instantly, betrayal clear. "This is a mistake."

Phil stepped forward, unflinching. "You made the mistake. Now you face the consequences."

The Ranger's heart hammered painfully, caught between loyalty and doubt, trust and fear. Her eyes flicked desperately between Phil and Loki, unable to choose a side—unable to understand which one was real.

Loki stood still, eyes locked onto hers, silently pleading for her trust.

But she hesitated, frozen, unable to decide who to believe.

And in that moment of hesitation—Mythos had already won.

Without warning, heavy steel doors slammed shut, sealing the warehouse with a chilling echo. Loki immediately reacted, hand extended cautiously toward the barrier, feeling the air pulse ominously around them.

"Magic," Loki murmured, eyes narrowing dangerously as thin, luminous lines etched into the walls flared softly to life. "Containment spells. I can't teleport us out."

Phil turned sharply, confusion and anger mingling in his expression. "This is a SHIELD containment facility—"

"No," Loki cut him off harshly, his voice low and grim. "This isn't SHIELD. We walked straight into Mythos' trap."

Phil hesitated, doubt flickering briefly before the anger in his chest flared, overwhelming reason. He stepped aggressively toward Loki, voice shaking with barely contained rage. "You expect me to believe you? After everything you've done? Every lie?"

Loki's jaw tightened, eyes flaring with intensity. "I've lied before, Coulson, but not about this."

Phil shook his head bitterly, pulling his phone violently from his pocket and thrusting it toward Loki's face. "Explain this, then. Explain why you betrayed her with Celeste. You enjoyed every second—didn't you?"

Loki stared in shock, realisation dawning coldly upon him as he watched the damning footage play. His heart seized painfully as he finally understood the reason behind the Ranger's recent mistrust. He turned slowly toward her, eyes pleading, voice filled with quiet anguish. "Is this why you wouldn't look at me?"

She took a shaky breath, eyes wide with confusion and lingering pain. "Loki, I saw you—"

"You saw what Mythos wanted you to see," he interrupted, stepping toward her with cautious urgency. "I swear to you—I charmed her, whispered sweet lies, but I never touched Celeste. Never."

Phil scoffed angrily. "How convenient."

"You've been manipulated," Loki snapped sharply, eyes blazing. "Mythos twisted your perceptions to break our trust."

The Ranger trembled, caught between doubt and longing. Her fingers instinctively reached for the pendant Loki had given her, seeking its reassuring warmth. "Loki… look me in the eyes and swear it. Swear to me it's true."

Loki moved even closer, cupping her face gently, his voice raw and open. “On my life, my honour, and every shred of my love for you—I swear I never betrayed you.”

She desperately wanted to believe him, yet the painful uncertainty lingered, shadowing her heart.

Phil’s voice, sharp with bitterness, sliced through the fragile silence. “Even if I could believe that, what about this?” He swiped his phone, revealing another video—body cam footage clearly showing Loki plunging his daggers into a uniformed police officer. “Explain why you murdered an innocent cop.”

The Ranger gasped softly, turning horrified eyes toward Loki, who stood rigidly, his expression growing colder by the second. Then, with quiet determination, Loki turned toward Phil, his voice deceptively calm, deadly serious.

“That wasn’t a police officer,” Loki explained icily, eyes locked onto Phil’s with intense clarity. “It was an assassin posing as one. He was paid by Mythos—to kill her.” His gaze flickered protectively toward the Ranger. “I stopped him. I would do it again without hesitation.”

Phil’s jaw tightened, doubt warring with lingering anger. “You expect us to believe—”

“I don’t expect you to believe anything, Coulson,” Loki snapped coldly. “But you need to understand that your hatred has blinded you. You’ve become the perfect puppet for Mythos.”

The Ranger remained silent, heart pounding violently, mind racing between what she’d seen and what Loki was saying. She searched Loki’s eyes desperately for any

trace of deception but saw only pain, sincerity, and fierce protectiveness.

Her phone buzzed suddenly, sharply cutting the tense silence.

All three froze, turning toward the sound. Hesitantly, she retrieved the phone and read Natasha's urgent message, her eyes widening in shock and relief.

"Natasha found proof," she whispered breathlessly. "The video… it was altered."

Loki exhaled sharply, relief washing over his face, though shadows of pain remained.

Phil's expression wavered, disbelief and anger battling confusion and regret. "How can we be sure?"

Loki stepped forward fiercely. "Because this is exactly what Mythos wants—to divide us, to weaken us."

Before Phil could reply, a chillingly gentle voice echoed through hidden speakers, filling the room with quiet dread:

"Too late."
Loki exhaled sharply, relief flooding him, pain still etched deeply in his features. "I told you."

Phil's expression darkened, eyes narrowing suspiciously, anger not fully relenting. "How do we even know that's real?"

Loki stepped forward sharply, desperation raw and unfiltered. “You must trust us now, Coulson—before Mythos destroys us all.”

A chilling voice echoed suddenly through hidden speakers, filling the room and freezing them all.

“Too late.”

They spun sharply, realising the real trap had only just begun…

“Too Late…”

The voice that echoed softly through hidden speakers was calm, gentle—almost disturbingly kind. It carried no threat in its tone, no malice, only quiet assurance. And that was perhaps the most terrifying thing of all.

“Too late.”

Silence followed, but only for a heartbeat.

Then came the sudden, faintest hiss from unseen vents hidden along the ceiling.

The Ranger’s eyes widened in immediate realisation. “GAS!”

Phil spun sharply, instantly understanding. Panic flared, desperation clawing at him as he searched for an escape—but there was none. The heavy steel doors remained locked, containment spells pulsing with faint, deadly power.

Mythos had beaten them. Completely. Beautifully.

And Phil had been the one to lead them here.

A raw, devastating guilt surged through him, gripping his heart like a vice. He had trusted a lie, had allowed his hatred of Loki to blind him—and now, because of him, they would all die. Loki, himself—and worst of all, the Ranger, whom he had sworn silently to protect.

Phil's gaze snapped desperately to Loki, grief and regret clear in his eyes. "I—I'm sorry," he choked out painfully, voice breaking. "This is my fault. I should have trusted you."

Loki's eyes locked briefly with Phil's, no bitterness or anger there—only grim, quiet acceptance. But his gaze quickly shifted, finding hers, and the pain that filled his expression was unbearable.

Loki knew there was only one way out—one brutal, agonising option that would exact a terrible cost.

His heart clenched violently, his expression that of a man whose soul had been ripped apart, shredded, left bleeding and raw.

Because to save them—to save her—he would have to ask for a sacrifice beyond measure.

Loki moved slowly toward the Ranger, ignoring the growing dizziness from the gas beginning to fill the room, his emerald eyes locked desperately onto hers, shimmering with vulnerability and heartbreak.

"There is a way out," he said softly, voice trembling with barely contained agony. "But it comes at a terrible price."

She stared back at him, panic and confusion etched clearly on her face, breath already becoming laboured. “What price?”

He reached out gently, fingertips brushing softly against her cheek, his gaze desperate, pleading—terrified of the answer he might hear. “You must trust me fully, completely. Even now, after everything… Can you still trust me enough for this?”

She hesitated, feeling consciousness slip slowly away, her heart aching as she read the raw, unbearable pain in Loki’s eyes.

Loki’s gaze remained locked onto the Ranger’s face, the world around them fading into oblivion. He could feel the poison in the air, his own lungs beginning to burn—but none of that mattered now.

He swallowed painfully, voice thick with agony. “To teleport us out of here, I must draw on your life essence. It is a magic of last resort, and the price…” His voice broke, his throat tightening painfully, eyes glistening. “The price could be your life.”

Her eyes widened briefly, understanding immediately. Yet, she did not waver—not even for a heartbeat. Her gaze shifted toward Phil, whose face was etched with horror and denial, before returning to Loki, softening into a gentle, trusting resolve.

“I trust you,” she whispered firmly, without hesitation, without fear. “My love, do whatever you need to do.”

Phil's voice was rough, desperate. "No—no, there must be another way—"

But Loki silenced him instantly, his eyes snapping sharply to Phil's, their intensity dark and searing, filled with a pain and fury that robbed Phil of any further protest.

Loki stepped closer, his trembling hand resting gently, tenderly, against her chest—directly over her heart.

Their eyes met once more, a thousand unspoken words passing between them, love and trust burning fiercely amid the agony.

Then Loki closed his eyes, calling on magic as ancient as time itself.

Golden-green energy flared around them, swirling powerfully, hungrily, drawing from the Ranger's very soul. Loki's face contorted in pain, every heartbeat a torture as he felt her life essence drain slowly into him, fueling the magic needed to teleport them away.

He felt her heartbeat weaken, fluttering beneath his palm —felt her life slipping dangerously close to oblivion. Fear clenched his heart fiercely, yet he did not stop. He couldn't.

With one final surge, the magic consumed them, and suddenly, they stood within the sterile brightness of SHIELD's medical wing.

The moment the magic faded, Loki's heart stopped as the Ranger's body suddenly went limp. Her eyes fluttered shut, her knees buckling beneath her.

Loki lunged desperately forward, catching her fragile form just before she hit the cold, unforgiving floor. He knelt down swiftly, lowering her gently, his hand pressed firmly against her chest.

Silence.

No heartbeat.

“No,” he choked out, raw, primal agony tearing from deep within him. “No, please… not like this!”

He cried out in pain, a sound of pure anguish echoing through the medical bay, drawing every eye, every alarm, every medical professional instantly toward them.

Doctors and nurses rushed urgently forward, barking orders, bringing life-saving equipment, hands swiftly taking over.

“Please,” Loki whispered brokenly, “bring her back.”

Phil stood frozen, pale and shattered, watching helplessly as they desperately fought to restart the Ranger’s heart—her life now balanced precariously between worlds.

The medical wing buzzed with frantic energy, each second stretching painfully long as SHIELD’s finest worked tirelessly, fighting to reclaim the Ranger from the brink of death.

Loki stood aside, eyes hollow, face pale, hands trembling. His every breath hinged on the smallest beep, the faintest sign of life. Phil stood silently nearby, face shadowed by unbearable guilt.

Then finally, after what felt like an eternity—

A single heartbeat registered on the monitor.
Then another.
Steady, fragile, but alive.

Loki exhaled sharply, his knees nearly buckling from relief. Medical staff carefully moved her into intensive care, gently securing tubes and sensors around her pale, still form.

Loki never left her side, standing silent vigil at her bedside, hand gently resting over hers, terrified to let go, as if her pulse might disappear again at any moment.

Heavy footsteps echoed down the corridor as Director Fury stormed into the medical wing, anger and worry shadowing his every movement.

“What the hell happened, Coulson?” he snapped sharply, glancing briefly into the ICU at Loki’s silent, grief-stricken form, then pinning Phil with a fierce gaze. “I thought you had this under control.”

Phil exhaled deeply, voice filled with guilt and shame. “We need to talk. Privately.”

Fury’s expression darkened, and without another word, he gestured toward a nearby empty briefing room.

Inside, Phil recounted everything. He spoke of the false intel, the betrayal he’d unwittingly carried out, Loki’s true sacrifice, the altered video, and finally—the way Mythos had played them all, expertly pulling their strings.

Fury listened quietly, his expression grim and unreadable. When Phil finally fell silent, Fury shook his head slowly, realisation dawning.

“He played us,” Fury said softly, frustration evident. “All this time, we thought we had a lead on Mythos. Turns out he had us exactly where he wanted.”

Phil nodded solemnly, guilt evident. “We never got close. We still don’t even know who he is.”

Fury exhaled heavily, eyes narrowing with determination. “Then we start again—carefully. He won this round, but it’s not over yet.”

In an elegant living room, bathed in warm golden light from a crackling fireplace, a shadowed figure sat comfortably in a luxurious armchair. A tablet rested casually on his lap, playing the footage of Loki’s desperate, last-minute escape, the Ranger’s near-death, and Phil’s raw devastation.

The man watched quietly, fingers gently tapping the tablet screen, a faint smile curving his lips.

A quiet, amused chuckle slipped into the silence, chilling in its calm satisfaction.

He had done it. Mythos had beaten them—broken them. He had crushed trust, fractured bonds, and shattered the resolve of even the God of Mischief himself.

If Loki—the Master of Deception—could fall, who on Earth stood a chance?

His smile widened, eyes reflecting the flames dancing before him.

No one.

The day had bled quietly into the next, marked only by the faint hum of medical equipment and the soft whispers of nurses moving cautiously around the intensive care unit. At the centre of it all, Loki sat unmoving at the Ranger's bedside, a silent sentinel bathed in shadow and grief.

No one dared approach him. The medical staff exchanged nervous glances, reluctant to disturb the grieving god, uncertain of what he might do should anyone interrupt his vigil.

The Ranger lay pale, motionless, her chest rising and falling with mechanical precision, heart beating faintly. But her consciousness remained distant, unreachable.

Loki gently brushed a strand of hair from her face, heart aching with each unresponsive breath. Closing his eyes, he took a deep, steadying breath and let his consciousness dive into the depths of her mind, seeking her in the vast, dark void that now engulfed her.

"My love," he called softly, desperately, his voice echoing through the endless shadows. "Please… come back to me. Follow my voice."

Silence.

Nothing answered him. Only darkness.

The Ranger drifted silently through an endless dark, her mind struggling to piece together memories, fragments of what had happened. She felt nothing but emptiness, confusion, and deep, aching isolation.

Then, faintly, from a great distance—a voice.

It resonated through the void, a gentle, familiar timbre that tugged powerfully at something deep within her.

“Please… come back to me.”

Loki?

She strained desperately toward it, awareness flickering, senses reaching toward the distant beacon of his voice.

“I’m here,” she called back softly, but the words dissolved into silence. Still, she clawed forward, determined to reach him, fighting desperately through the endless shadows.

Phil stood outside the ICU, lingering at the doorway, his expression etched with deep remorse. He could glimpse Loki at her bedside, saw his grief-stricken posture, felt the heavy weight of silent accusation.

He had done this. His stubbornness, his mistrust had led to this moment.

Phil shuddered at the thought—what if she never woke up? What if he had destroyed the very thing Loki cared about most? What would Loki become then?

Phil's fists tightened painfully at his sides, head bowed in quiet despair.

Sharp footsteps echoed down the corridor, breaking the silence as Natasha Romanoff arrived, her expression tight and unreadable. She paused briefly at the ICU entrance, taking in the sight of Loki sitting silently beside the Ranger's fragile form, agony etched deeply into every line of his posture.

Her jaw tightened slightly before she turned, moving decisively toward Phil, who stood to the side, shoulders hunched in shame.

"Tell me everything," Natasha demanded sharply, her voice clipped and cold.

Phil hesitated briefly before quietly recounting all that had occurred: the false orders, the manipulated videos, the horrific trap, and Loki's desperate act to save them all.

When he finished, Natasha's gaze turned icy, her voice filled with barely controlled anger. "Why didn't you double-check those videos? Why didn't you call me, Coulson? You know better!"

Phil swallowed painfully, unable to meet her fierce stare. "I… I don't have a good answer," he admitted softly, voice thick with guilt. "I wanted them to be real. I wanted Loki to be exactly what I always thought he was."

Natasha exhaled sharply, eyes narrowing in grim understanding. “Mythos played you like a puppet. He knew exactly what strings to pull.”

Phil nodded slowly, unable to deny the truth. “And now she might pay the price.”

Natasha’s voice hardened, resolve strengthening within her. “No. We won’t lose her. We can’t afford to.”

She turned sharply back toward the ICU, eyes narrowing thoughtfully, determined to find some way to undo the damage done.

Another long, agonising day had passed. Loki remained at the Ranger’s bedside, never leaving, never letting go of her fragile hand. His eyes were heavy with exhaustion, heart weighed down by fear that he might never see her wake again.

Then, suddenly—a slight, almost imperceptible twitch in her fingers.

Loki’s heart stopped, breath catching sharply in his throat.

He leaned forward instantly, holding perfectly still, hoping desperately, fearing to hope at all.

Another gentle twitch, stronger this time.

“My love,” he whispered softly, voice breaking with relief and overwhelming emotion.

And then, slowly, her fingers curled weakly around his own.

Her eyes fluttered open, struggling to focus, meeting his gaze slowly—recognition brightening gently within their depths. The doubt, the painful mistrust that had previously shadowed her gaze was entirely gone, replaced by the warmth of love, trust—true, unshakable recognition.

Loki's breath hitched sharply, tears stinging his eyes as something deep within him shattered—releasing all the pain, fear, and guilt he had held so tightly.

"You came back," he breathed, voice shaking. "You found your way back to me."

Within seconds, medical staff rushed over urgently, gently but swiftly checking her vitals, monitoring her closely, making sure everything was stable and safe.

"She's awake," someone called out, relief and joy filling the medical wing.

Loki stepped slightly aside but kept his grip gently firm on her hand, unwilling to release her even now, unwilling to lose her warmth again.

The Ranger's tired gaze never left Loki's face, a small, weak smile curling gently at her lips, speaking a thousand unspoken reassurances and promises.

Suddenly, hurried footsteps echoed in the corridor, and Scarlett burst into the ICU, eyes wide with desperate hope. Seeing the Ranger awake, her expression transformed instantly to relief and joy.

“Oh, thank god!” Scarlett rushed closer, pausing briefly beside Loki, glancing at him with gratitude and understanding before turning warmly toward the Ranger.

“You scared us,” Scarlett said softly, eyes shining. “But welcome back.”

The Ranger nodded faintly, exhausted but grateful, her fingers tightening slightly around Loki’s once more—grounding herself in the love and strength she found there.

Loki finally exhaled deeply, the painful tension draining from his body. He met Scarlett’s eyes briefly, silently exchanging their mutual relief.

Then he turned back toward the Ranger, heart full and eyes bright with fierce devotion.

He had nearly lost her, but she was back. And he would never allow anyone—Mythos or otherwise—to take her from him again.

Several days passed quietly, allowing the Ranger to gradually regain her strength. Though physically improving, the emotional scars lingered deep, unseen yet felt profoundly. She knew exactly what she needed now: distance, solitude, and Loki.

Away from SHIELD. Away from Mythos. Away from the madness.

She stood quietly beside Loki, hands gently entwined, prepared to teleport back to the sanctuary of their log

cabin in the woods, when hesitant footsteps echoed softly behind them.

Phil approached slowly, his expression one of profound guilt, regret evident in every hesitant movement. He paused, swallowing painfully as he finally met her eyes.

“I’m… I’m sorry,” he began, voice strained. “This was my fault. If I’d—”

The Ranger lifted a hand gently, her voice soft, compassionate. “Phil, please. We were all played by Mythos. You weren’t alone in this.”

He hesitated, clearly struggling. “I nearly cost you your life.”

She shook her head softly, eyes gentle yet firm. “I understand, Phil. But you need to let this go. Let the past go. We need time—away from this. From everything.”

Phil nodded slowly, his gaze drifting uncertainly toward Loki. He hesitated briefly, the tension thickening as he finally stepped toward him. “Loki…”

Loki remained silent, expression unreadable at first—but then he slowly turned his eyes fully upon Phil.

The gaze he gave him spoke volumes—silent words sharper than any spoken aloud.

It wasn’t anger, nor hatred, nor even resentment.

It was understanding.

And beneath that understanding… pity.

Phil froze, his heart tightening sharply. He saw in Loki's gaze a truth he'd never fully faced—that he'd clung desperately to old grudges, to a past version of Loki that no longer existed. He saw clearly, perhaps for the first time, his own inability to let go, to forgive.

The pity in Loki's eyes cut him deeper than any blade could.

Phil lowered his gaze, swallowing painfully, stepping back in quiet acknowledgment.

Loki gently wrapped his arms around the Ranger, pulling her close, feeling her relax instantly into his warmth. Their eyes met, exchanging silent understanding, love, and shared relief.

With a whisper of magic, they were gone, leaving only a faint glow and fading silence behind.

Epilogue – An Uncertain Peace

In the quiet solitude of their log cabin, deep within the serenity of the woods, Loki and the Ranger finally found peace. They held each other quietly, letting time slip gently by, healing wounds that ran far deeper than any physical pain.

Yet, far away, Mythos sat quietly in the flickering glow of his fireplace, a faint smile still playing at his lips.

He was patient.

The game was not yet finished. Not by far.

The End.

For now…..